

RABBI ON THE GANGES



A JEWISH-HINDU ENCOUNTER



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Preface

I wrote this book based on my observations made during an academic sabbatical as a Fulbright scholar at Banaras Hindu University in the holy city of Varanasi on the Ganges River. I taught, studied, and recorded my observations on a Jewish Hindu encounter. My own religious practice of dietary rules and prayer did not need to be justified in a city where almost everyone follows religious dietary guidelines and regular times for prayer. I taught Judaism to Hindu and Buddhist graduate students who were swiftly able to provide similarities between the dharmic faiths and my presentation of Judaism. Every discussion yielded insights of encounter.

As soon as I was off the plane in India, some of the Hindus at the embassy and university introduced themselves to me by explaining how they were similar to me in observance. Some said they were Orthodox, others said they were observant and not old-time Orthodox, others said they were modern Hindus, while some said they only keep the major festivals. These term distinctions of self-identification of one's ritual practice were quite familiar to me.

When I learned about Hindu ritual, its prayers, its marriage and dietary laws, and its ethics, I always considered how the same statements would just as well apply to my own Jewish ritual practice. Their middle-class practice of ritual observance, Temple worship and Hindu life was similar, yet different from my own.

Originally, I thought I was going to focus my comparisons on Jewish and Hindu law or on how Talmud and Kabbalah look very different when juxtaposed with Indian equivalents. My scope, however, rapidly expanded when I returned home to the Jewish community. When I was explaining Hinduism as a religion to Jews, they asked many questions about the basics of Hinduism and its variety. I received detailed questions from my audience.

Over time, I received phone calls from rabbis asking for explanations of basic points of Hinduism as they pertain to Jewish law. Many of the chapters reflect questions and concerns of my educated and observant Jewish audiences, such as the Orthodox students on college campuses who

repeatedly ask me about Hinduism and menstruation compared to the Jewish laws of menstruant purity (*hilkhot niddah*). In the end, it was clear that my Jewish audience needed an introductory encounter with Hinduism. This meant having the prospect to reverse the lack of any mutual understanding of the two ancient religions.

This book is aimed primarily at Jews, but Hindus might also find it useful to find Jewish parallels to Hindu concepts and practices. This book has three purposes: to introduce Hinduism to Jews; for some Hindus to find a way to understand Judaism outside of any connection to Christianity; and probably most importantly, as an act of self-understanding of Judaism after exposure to Hinduism, thereby producing new insights into Judaism. Just as exposure to the wisdom of Aristotle, al-Farabi, and Kierkegaard enriched Judaism, so too the many ideas and systems of Hindu wisdom can enrich Jewish self-understanding.

An aura of religion and a diversity of spirituality is felt in many Hindu cities. Similar to the manner in which some Jewish spiritual seekers look to sixteenth-century Jewish Safed as a source of ritual and kabbalistic creativity, a neighborhood of only a few blocks square that contained twenty-one synagogues and eighteen study halls as well as the famed kabbalistic rabbis, Cordovero, Luria, Alsheikh, Azikri, Karo, and others. So too, contemporary Hinduism in India holds much of that same attraction in which a single small city can have dozens of Temples, ashrams, and spiritual teachers.

The Hindu-Jewish encounter allows the Jewish community to think about another religion with whom it has not had a rocky history of discrimination, but rather a millennium of peaceful coexistence. In addition, consider the forty thousand Israeli youth who visit India every year. As these youths mature, they naturally conceptualize Hinduism within the framework of their Jewish religion.

AVOIDING MISREADING

This book also has the goal of helping to ensure that in Jewish contexts Hinduism is presented correctly. The Hinduism that I encountered was contemporary Hinduism in all its diversity and quest for contemporary twenty-first century meaning. Hindus present themselves and think of

themselves as open, scientific, and tolerant; they consider Hinduism both a way of life and a religion. Similar to the way Jews see themselves.

Jews, however, continue to ask them about how they currently practice something in the ancient books described in 800 BCE or from 200 CE.

Alternately, Jews will declare that the sophisticated Hinduism they are meeting and reading about are only the elite but the masses are not like this and that the masses still somehow observe the twenty-five-hundred-year-old practices. Even Jews who have spent time in ashrams, who are generally favorable toward Hinduism arrogantly assume that the Hindu masses do not understand their own faith or have not changed in a millennium; therefore, I focused on the medieval and modern forms of Hinduism, in much the same way I would focus on the medieval and modern forms of Judaism.

On the other hand, it is fair to note that many Hindus think Jews are still keeping the faith of Leviticus or that contemporary Jewish communities are still struggling with physical golden calves and Molech worship among our laity. Based on the nineteenth-century Western books in the library, some of the Hindus thought that Judaism was solely the ritual religion of Leviticus. I naturally conveyed to them a sense of the thousands of years of subsequent Jewish religion and that just as their practices are not the Iron Age versions, neither are mine.

I explained to Hindus how the Jews are not Leviticus or medieval cosmology, but rather modern Jews, a twenty-first-century people looking for contemporary meaning. Therefore, when a Hindu discusses a modern understanding of faith, that is not the same as the Bronze Age practice, it is not apologetic or only for outside consumption any more than the gap between Leviticus and twenty-first-century Jewish thought, practice, and values are only for Jewish apologetics.

Throughout the entire modern period, Western authors compared Hinduism to the outdated laws of the Hebrews and condemned both. Many modern Christian thinkers from the seventeenth through the twentieth century denigrated Judaism as a religion without ethics, as childish thinking, as petrified antiquity, and as empty superstition. Some Western Christian philosophers even wrote that Judaism was not a religion since it fails to satisfy the essential criteria of religion and demands only external obedience to statutes and laws.

During the same era, many of these same Western thinkers painted

Hinduism with identical brushstrokes: as immoral, focused on external obedience, and devoid of ethics. Unfortunately, most Jews still think Hindus are these outdated textbook chapters on the Vedas and other ancient texts. Both religions, however, have rich traditions filled with philosophers and jurists, poets and reformers, modernizers and mystics. In the last seventy years, the Western Christian conversation about Judaism has shifted as part of a reconciliation with Christianity, but I am surprised still to find it in Western descriptions of other faiths.

Practices have changed considerably; one should not condemn contemporary Jews for the ancient, no-longer-practiced laws of selling their daughters to be polygamous wives or having to marry their rapist as stated in the Bible, so too one should not assume that modern Hindu marriage and social practices have not changed from the *Dharma Shashtra*. In fact, many of these Hindu practices are culturally bound—most notably, rules of widows and of caste. I am highly sympathetic to the struggles of the American Hindu community, which has their faith presented in American textbooks as an ancient version unpracticed for a millennium, rather than a sophisticated modern faith. They also want their faith presented in a positive light based on their own thinkers and poets rather than the Western critics of Indian society.

Hinduism transcends its ancient past through philosophy, medieval scholasticism, and legal codes as well as modernism and contemporary thought in much the same way Judaism has Maimonides, Kabbalah, *halakhah*, modern thinkers and creative authors, and an engagement with contemporary issues. Religious life at the Hindu temples is diverse and contemporary; the Hindu after-school programs, youth clubs, family picnics, and cultural performances are more reminiscent of a twentieth-century American synagogue, which served as a cultural community rather than as a center of late antiquity practices.

Both religions have had more than two millennia of commentary until the modern age of globalization; consequently, I also avoided the simplistic attempts to present Hinduism as a handful of basic ideas because Hinduism has dozens of major thinkers with contrasting theological schemes. Finally, as Hinduism becomes an American religion, it needs to explain itself and formulate itself into American terms in the same way Judaism did. Both Hinduism and Judaism are complete and complex cultures involving lifestyle

and national identity.

UNDERSTANDING HINDUISM

In this book, I wear many hats and play many roles. Each of these roles do not line up completely with the others, which ultimately creates a more diverse encounter. I speak as academic and rabbi, believer and anthropologist, as open to the wisdom in all faiths and as a defender of my own particular religion.

The book starts with my story. Most of the chapters include pieces of my own travelogue and encounters. This book is the product of a journey that accounts for and documents a crossing over into a different way of thinking.

Nothing is entirely theoretical, even if it may seem that way to those readers who do not treat metaphysics as personal. I enjoy teaching Jewish metaphysical schemes. Systems of emanation and metaphysical theologies of the divine are both my Judaism and my academic specialty in Judaism. Equally important is that the college educated Hindus whom I encountered understood their own Hinduism through philosophy, medieval commentaries on classical texts, and its modern conceptual frameworks. They were also deeply committed to their Temple worship, so my experiences are very different from a Jew who might spend time in *Advaita* ashrams.

These metaphysical deliberations play a role even in simple discussions. I have a Jewish Indian neighbor whose birth name in Sanskrit means King of the Universe. As his Hebrew name, he uses the name *melekh*, meaning king, but without the self-reference to King of the Universe. Both Judaism and Hinduism have many theists who believe that God is the king of the universe—a transcendent omnipotent omniscience theistic God—and both employ a similar liturgical phrase, but Jews would not call a human by a divine epithet. Hinduism does not have the Jewish sense of distancing from God, the avoidance of mentioning God's name, or not referring to earthly items as divine.

As many have noted in my talks, I have a fondness for the wisdom of Hinduism, a fondness now called by contemporary scholars as *allophilia*, love of the other. I have also developed an affinity for breaking out of my

comfort zone and looking at these new religious texts.

An example of a text that I like is the following story of Vishnu saving the elephant (Gajendra Moksha). It is a much larger story, but the crux of it concerns the king of the elephants who had been bathing in a beautiful lake when he was seized by the foot by the jaws of a crocodile. After an exhaustive struggle with the crocodile, the elephant became utterly fatigued and was on the brink of death. Finally, in desperation he called upon God for help, saying a prayer about giving himself entirely in surrender to Vishnu. He proclaims that God is within all of us and God is the creative force of everything around us. We all need to offer Him our respects. In his prayer, he beseeches for compassion to the unknowable, all-powerful divine God who created the universe. Yet, he knows God cannot be reached by exercises of the mind, words, or consciousness. At that point, Vishnu swooped down and freed the elephant from certain death. The story is symbolic of God's readiness to save humankind, just as he saved the elephant from the jaws of the crocodile. In the moment of utter surrender, God rushes to our aid.

I might want to tell that story during the Jewish High Holy Days as a story of repentance and submission before the infinite God, but I cannot use it as my own story since it addresses the personified unknowable monotheism of Vishnu. One can see piety, God, goodness, and dignity in a faith not my own, but I preserve the fact that it is not my own. I am secure enough in my own Judaism, yet moved by an other faith, even as I know that it is not my religion to use. I seek mutual enrichment, appreciation, and respect in encountering other religions.

Ideally, the reader should read this volume in conjunction with contemporary introductions to Hinduism as well as the original sources. I provide a list of several recommended books in the footnotes and bibliography.

I know that I have covered an extraordinary amount of content in this book; yet, at the same time, I had to be selective and choose content based on the premise that I would provide an introductory encounter for my audience. Among the many topics not covered, but that I still feel guilty about leaving out include: the gods Ganesha, Murugan, Ayyannar, and Hanuman; Hindu books such as *Isvara Gita*, *Vasya Yoga*, and Tulsidas's *Ramayana*; the devotional poems *Thirumurai* of the Nayanars, the *Nalayira*

Divya Prabandham of the twelve Alvar, and the worship of Sai Baba; the cities of Kanchipuram, Hariwar, Mathura, and Edison, New Jersey, and general topics of the Vedagas, especially astrology, the importance of temples, the Divya Desam, and sacred sites. Personally, I would have loved to work more on Shiva Siddhana, Kashmir Shaivism, and Vallabha Vaishnavism because my interests are theological and philosophical.

Acknowledgments

Hinduism teaches that one welcomes strangers by treating the guest as a god: “May the guest be thy god.” (*Taittiriya Upanishad*, I.11.2). This Upanishad encourages one to treat hospitality as worship and underscores the act of seeing the divine in one’s neighbor.

In the process of writing this book, many showed me hospitality and kindness. I must thank everyone involved in the Fulbright Scholar Program, The Council for International Exchange of Scholars (CIES), and the India Educational Foundation (USIEF) including Catherine Johnston, Matto Pavitra Soram; Vinita Khatri and Adam J. Grotzky. I wish to thank everyone at BHU. At the Malaviya Centre for Peace Research, especially Priyankar Upadhyaya—who made my apartment and so much more happen—Manoj Mishra, and Ajay Kumar Yadav. I especially thank S. D. P. Singh, office assistant, who helped me with the Indian governmental paperwork.

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Chapter 1

A Jewish Encounter with Hinduism

ENCOUNTERING HINDUISM

My classroom building on the immense Banaras Hindu University campus reminded me of British Mandate era buildings in Jerusalem. It obviously had been built in the 1940s, or at least refurbished then. All the desks had inkwells.

Among the students earnestly taking notes were Buddhist monks from Thailand and Cambodia wearing orange robes; two Tibetans, one of whom looked like a Sherpa in his yak-wool vest; an Australian Christian dressed like a hippie trying to dress like an Indian, and several Indians dressed in modern clothing. Up front, wearing a *sherwani*, a traditional Indian long golden coat, was the professor of Hindu religion and philosophy who normally taught this course on Western religion. He was particularly diligent in his note taking.

Then came a question that highlighted both the vast gulf between Indian and Jew, and the commonalities between Indian and Jewish religion: “Do Jews still sacrifice animals?” Probably few Christians in America do not know that Jews stopped sacrificing animals nearly two thousand years ago. However, in India, the question made perfect sense. After all, in India, animal sacrifices only ended in the early twentieth century and they still occur in Nepal.

The question was emblematic of my stay in India—a place where Judaism does not register on the religious awareness of even the most educated, but where people’s intensely religious lives—full of household ritual, frequent prayers, hand washings, and elaborate food regulations—makes it in some ways much closer to Judaism than Christianity.

I spent a sabbatical year in India teaching in the graduate school of religion and philosophy at Banaras Hindu University in the city of Varanasi, where I had a Fulbright-Nehru fellowship, courtesy of the U.S. State Department. I titled my project “A Needed Dialogue and Encounter of

Hinduism and Judaism,” an encounter between two ancient religious traditions that have had relatively little interaction.

I was encouraged to go to India because of the positive response of my single chapter on Hinduism in my 2012 book, “Judaism and World Religions.” Yet, I was able to catalog those encounters—many consisting simply of medieval rabbis responding to reports of Indian religion in Arabic writings—in just one chapter in my book. [\[1\]](#)

In Banaras, I taught an introduction to Judaism course as part of the Introduction to Western Religions course required of graduate students in the religion school. Even the course’s usual instructor had never heard of Talmud or Midrash. And he too was surprised to learn that Jews stopped bringing animal sacrifices long ago, in the first century. He assumed that the practice had not ended until Judaism’s nineteenth-century Reform movement as it had been by India’s nineteenth-century religious reformers.

Just as they knew little about Judaism, the most important thing I learned was that Jews should not trust any of the generalizations, stereotypes, or almost anything written in American popular literature on Hinduism, even the most basic things that come on a Google search are often incorrect. I recommend reading this book in conjunction with one of the many fine introductions to Hinduism, so that the reader has an anchor in firm understanding of Hinduism. [\[2\]](#)

Hinduism

India is a big place with 1.3 billion people. As of the 2001 census, 80 percent of Indians are Hindu; 13 percent Muslim (making India the country with the world’s third largest Muslim population), and the rest mostly divided between Christianity—a Western import—and the homegrown religions of Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism. However, the religion called Hinduism is really a collection of related religious, philosophical, and cultural traditions with common roots and practices but great differences that are recognized by individual practitioners.

Compare this phenomenon to someone who sees Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as essentially one religion. After all, the three monotheistic religions share the same theology of one God who created the world and

rewards and punishes sinners; and they share many religious figures, such as Abraham and Moses.

In reality, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are at least three religions—and the closer you look at any one of them, the less monolithic it appears to be. All the more so in India—with its 122 major languages and more than fifteen hundred minor languages, representing myriad distinct ethnic groups. Almost any obscure Hindu sect has more members than there are Jews.

Hinduism is generally regarded as the world's oldest organized religion. It consists of “thousands of different religious groups that have evolved in India since 1500 BCE.”^[3]

Hinduism is really a variety of religions held together in the twentieth century by politics and agreed upon commonalities. Common definitions of Hinduism claim that it is a “complex, organic, multileveled and sometimes internally inconsistent nature.”^[4] Alternately, Hinduism does not have a unified system of belief encoded in a declaration of faith, but it is an umbrella term comprising the plurality of religious phenomena of India. Hinduism differs from Judaism and other Western religions in that it does not have: a single founder, a specific theological system, a single concept of deity, a single holy text, or a single central religious authority.

The term “Hindu” itself originally referred to those from India. As a term for people of a specific religion, it probably does not go back before the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when it was used by people to differentiate themselves from followers of other traditions, especially the Muslims (Yavannas), in Kashmir and Bengal. The “ism” was added to “Hindu” only in the nineteenth century in the context of British colonialism and missionary activity. Hinduism has been variously defined as a religion, a religious tradition, a set of religious beliefs, and as a way of life. Hindu traditionalists prefer to call it *Sanatana Dharma* (the eternal or ancient *dharma*).

According to the Supreme Court of India: “Unlike other religions in the world, the Hindu religion does not claim any one Prophet, it does not worship any one God, it does not believe in any one philosophic concept, it does not follow any one act of religious rites or performances; in fact, it does not satisfy the traditional features of a religion or creed. It is a way of life and nothing more.”^[5] Hindu family law includes jurisdiction over

panentheists, polytheists, monotheists and monists; those that use images and those that reject them.

Hinduism is too varied and vast to be defined in terms of a core belief shared by everyone. Rather it is like a banyan tree with a multiple root system creating a cluster of trees linked together under a single canopy unlike the monocentric/single trunk beech or oak. It is a web of numerous systems of belief and practice united by a common attitude of mind structuring the world in terms of a transcendent source that manifests itself in multiple forms. No other religion admits such polycentrism.

Banaras Hindu University

I lived in Varanasi, an ancient town with a continuous residence of the same people since the sixth century BCE and possibly continuous since the thirteenth century BCE. The town is also known as Kashi (its ancient name) and Banaras (its Hindu name). Banaras Hindu University, founded in 1916 by Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, during the colonial period, with the financial aid of theosophist Annie Besant, is the oldest and largest residential university in Asia. The campus is twice the size of Central Park in New York and arranged as ornate buildings set back among hibiscus and jasmine flowers. Most of the campus is used for the fields of technology, agriculture, and medicine, so the size of the arts and sciences section that I had to transverse was limited.

Banaras Hindu University is, as its name implies, a religious college—as are, in their way, Seton Hall and my alma mater, Yeshiva University. Banaras, now called Varanasi, is in one of India's holiest cities, on the banks of the sacred Ganges river, the city of a million residents that draws three million pilgrims each year—many with the belief that dying in the holy city, or being cremated on the shores of the Ganges, will prove auspicious. This is the city that you see in the pictures where thousands come out to bathe in the Ganges and everyone waits in line on the *ghats* (the staircases down to the river) in order to place votive lights in the dark river water.

To use an Israeli metaphor, it is like Bar Ilan University, a modern Orthodox institution located near Bnai Brak, an ultra-Orthodox center. There were plenty of ways in which Banaras reminded me of Yeshiva U. There were the pious students who kissed their sacred Sanskrit texts, like yeshiva

students kissing their Bibles or Talmuds. Some went further and kissed their Sanskrit dictionaries, an extension of the realm of holiness seen in Jewish circles. The pious students also paused at the doorway to touch the floor—reminiscent of the YU students who would kiss the mezuzah on the door jamb.

With that in mind, I was particularly keen to find out how my classes on Judaism would resonate with the Indian students. I was thrilled to see them catch on to subtle points. When the students read Genesis, “they all said, ‘Look! Adam was originally a vegetarian.’” This led me to explain the similar reading of the text by the fifteenth century Jewish thinker Joseph Albo.

And the philosophy of Maimonides in his *Guide to the Perplexed* earned the high praise of being yogic. For them, yogic is not just exercise; rather it is attaining a level of consciousness through understanding the true nature of the self. One moves from false consciousness to regaining the truth through correcting your mind and your habits. Yoga for them is a process by which you elevate the human condition through philosophy, correct ethics, meditation, and also physical discipline.

The Indian students found that some of the most esoteric ideas of Judaism were the easiest for them to grasp. Theoretical kabbalistic discussions of whether God is separate from the world, whether the world is all God, and how God infuses the world are similar to the topics discussed in their standard fare courses in the scholastic Hindu metaphysics of *Vedanta*, Yoga, and Shaivism. The students generally spent much of their time studying how Hindu emanation schemes work.

There was a court case in India recently where the judge ruled that Hinduism is a way of life, not a religion—the same way as many Jews see themselves. Hinduism gives Jews a template for us, as Jewish, for self-understanding as opposed to using the Christian concept of religion. Some of the things that seem least Christian about Judaism make the most sense to Hindus.

My ethnographic discovery of Hinduism started already in New York when there was a meeting of Fulbright scholars in a restaurant. Those from the Midwest got there first and ordered food. When the Hindus and Jews arrived, we discussed whether fish is considered meat; for Jews it is not but for most Hindus it is. However, there were Bengali Hindus present for whom fish is not considered meat.

We also discussed the mushrooms on the pizza because many Brahmins do not eat mushrooms since they are a fungus, not a vegetable. This is similar to the Rabbinic tradition where mushrooms warrant a different blessing than vegetables since they are a fungus. In one religion, they are not eaten and in the other, they receive a different blessing, but both religions share a commonality of thinking in taxonomy and structural differences. The actual practice is different, but there is a certain common way of thinking, of always doing categorization and creating a rule for it.

While Banaras is a coeducational institution, unlike Yeshiva College, still men and women cannot touch. When there was a school performance, it was very much like a yeshiva day school play. One could profitably compare how to do dramatics in both faiths with the similar Orthodox Jewish and Hindu ban on unrelated males and females touching each other.

The lead male role in the play was given to a girl, so that she could touch and hug the heroine. A minor male role was performed by an actual male student, but the rest of the individual roles were women. The men served as a background dance troupe, acting out selected events in the narrative. And like at a day school, there was the awkward ending when the female students only received flowers and a shawl from the female dean and the male students from the male dean.

If the school was traditional, old-time Brahmin, there would have been no mixing allowed. If it was fully modern then it would not have been a question—that is likely the case at India's secular universities. Instead, they try to walk the same tightrope as their modern Orthodox counterparts.

I was comfortable with the way people felt compelled to tell me their religious affiliation and religious practice as part of their self-presentation. As soon as I arrived, a woman in the Fulbright office introduced herself as an orthodox Hindu, proceeding to compare her perception of the common Jewish and Hindu orthodox practices.

Many other people I encountered said they were observant Hindus or ritually observant Hindus, but not like those too-strict orthodox. Still others said they were traditional. I also encountered those who told me they were sometimes observant. Many said they were more observant during festivals than non-festivals or more observant at home than away. I also met many who said they were unobservant, minimally observant, or focused on the modern philosophic meaning rather than ritual.

Yet, even coming from Orthodox Judaism, I was impressed with those Hindu professors who arose at five o'clock in the morning, bathed in the Ganges river, went to Temple, worshipped at home, studied sacred writings, and fed the poor all before my day started.

The biggest impact of my teaching in India was possibly cultural. They had never really thought of Judaism, of where it fits in. They only knew it through Christian or anti-Semitic eyes, through Shylock or *Mein Kampf*. "So, what do you think about Hitler" turns out to be a common conversation opener without meaning any personal offense. They have no knowledge of the Jewish historical experience or the Eastern European aspects of World War II. Their World War II experience ran from Burma to Indochina.

For these future religious teachers and religious leaders studying at Banaras, the whole course of Jewish history and our self-conception as a people, the Holocaust, Israel—did not register. They tend to think of religion in the abstract as ritual and philosophy. The Jewish organizations have a great deal to gain in creating a teaching guide about Judaism and about Israel for the Indians. The biggest impact that my teaching could have on Judaism would be to encourage Jews to encounter Hinduism as explained in the next chapter.

WRITING ABOUT HINDUISM

This book asks the important question: How do I be true to my own faith and still speak about another religion in a way that rings true for both sides.

I write as a Jewish thinker who has begun to glimpse something of the richness and importance of the world beyond Jewish frameworks. In every age there are border crossers who bring back the fruits of their encounters to those who have not made the journey. I write as a way for presenting Hinduism to Jews, but hope that it will also be useful to Hindus and to all those interested in interreligious encounter.

This book will be an understanding of Hinduism from a Jewish point of view, and specifically my view based on Orthodox Jewish training and erudition. I looked at aspects of the Hindu religion with a Jewish understanding that is both academic and rabbinical. I cannot overcome my own observer status and that my comments are from my own perspective.

My journey introduced me to the wisdom of Hinduism and, in turn, I

came back a better Jew able to use its wisdom to see my tradition in a new light. In some ways, to use a Hindu term, I was on my own *sadhana*, a spiritual discipline for a goal, in this case, understanding and insight.

Judaism assumes that there is wisdom among the gentiles, in that we have no trouble using the wisdom of Christian thinkers such as Aquinas, Kierkegaard, Barth, or Tillich to understand Judaism. The same should apply to the writings of Ramanuja, Shankara, and Vivekananda. Jews can use the wisdom of the scholasticism of *Nyaya*, or the legal theory of *Mimamsa* the same way we use Western logic and jurisprudence. Most importantly, and as a primary thrust, the goal is to recognize that there is wisdom among the nations and Indian philosophy is deep and enriching for Judaism, no less than Western philosophy. Hindu theological reasoning is just as important as Christian theology.

Comparison

This book is influenced by the current approach of comparative theology, even if not following its rigorous rules. One starts with the teachings of one's own tradition and with a desire for having one's own faith confront others with different commitments. The field of comparative theology does not think about the general meaning of religious diversity. Instead they engage specific texts, motifs and claims. It draws on resources of more than one tradition and is willing to be changed from what it learns from other traditions. [\[6\]](#)

If comparisons and contrasts with another faith tradition are to be done properly then they have to be done in conversation with the practice and expertise of the other faith including their own self-understanding. What one says about another religion needs to be understood by the believers in the other traditions. An exercise in comparative theology must be accountable to members of the faith for the accuracy and theological relevance of what they write. The comparisons are only as good as their theological value. Many of them are a homology, a similarity based on a similar function in a system.

The study of other religions helps our intellectual coming to God. This is an activity of faith seeking understanding and confronting the world in

which we live. This encounter of two religions pushes me to new possibilities of thinking about Judaism. Beyond that, observing the diversity of human religious life, similar and different from one's own, teaches one about the broader issues of religious life. Perhaps, in the culmination, God transforms the self; in seeking wisdom, we see ourselves anew.

When appropriate, I invite the reader, in this book, to reconsider the differences between the faiths by discussion of an overlooked part of the Jewish religion, to consider a neglected commonality. Knowing the best in other religions creates a desire to emulate and learn from the higher aspirations. The wisdom can push me to think about the possible, even if usually ignored.

This book will make the most sense to a reader who thinks about Judaism in textual and philosophic terms. If one's Judaism consists of the textual richness of the Talmud and Midrash, *Zohar* and Cordovero, Saadiah and Maimonides, and Heschel and Solovetichik then one will be most comfortable with the conceptual framework of the book, especially if one can follow the debates on immanence and transcendence or rationalism and mysticism in Judaism.

Think of Judaism as a full pantry of spices and ingredients. We can produce a Judaism that resonates with Hindu ideas and doctrines by selecting certain ingredients of Judaism and combining them in atypical proportions to produce a similar taste to Hinduism, and visa versa from Hinduism to Judaism. In this case, I choose to use aspects of the philosophic and mystical elements of Judaism to illuminate similarities between Judaism and Hinduism.

Understanding emerges only by means of particular texts, doctrines, liturgical practices, and moral precepts. This process demands a sense of humility that Judaism endorses in principle as an openness to the wisdom of others. The investigation needs to note both differences and similarities between Judaism and other religions. Only in this way, can there be a mutual understanding, full of challenge, correction, and enrichment, for both religions.

The broadening of perspective here, in this book, is that God can work in other traditions, languages, and religions. We are not compelled to affirm other traditions, but neither does faith require us to think that what we already have is all that we can know. The encounter for intelligent faith and

diversity may be providential.

We cannot learn about another tradition from within our own texts and community. We actually have to go out of our own texts and comfort zone. We cannot learn about another tradition from within our own—we actually have to study the other faith. Yet, we need to come to the table with the breadth and depth of our conviction and grounding in a given religious tradition.

When we look at another religion, we have to understand that we are not all the same and that we have to respect differences. The quest for common features does not mean that all religions are the same; rather, differences will persist and may emerge in a sharper and more interesting way. Yet, at the same time, we are not entirely different from each other and share many commonalities. In addition, even when we look at the commonalities, we have to understand that nothing is completely identical, so we keep differences, large and small, in mind. But nothing is entirely dissimilar so there is implicit comparison on many small and major details. One must bear in mind that one should not compare their myth to your law, or their mysticism to your rationalism. Comparison needs to be comparing the same in both religions, myth to myth, law to law, and mysticism to mysticism.

We engage in interreligious encounter to clear up misconceptions on both sides, but also to show our sincere and committed endeavor to work as a religious person with others. To sanctify God's name we present ourselves to a wider world in a dignified and respectful manner. Interfaith encounter simultaneously cultivates better religious self-understanding and aids in the bettering of relationships with other faiths.

Hospitality, a term stressed by the Jewish thinker Emmanuel Levinas, is openness to new perspectives through leaving one's safe precinct. An important element in approaching other faiths is the need to go out of one's comfort zone. One actually needs to meet someone of another faith, placing oneself in a situation where one may be confronting new perspectives. One needs to see, meet, talk, and enter the realm of the other. In an age of globalization, people now have increasing contact with other faiths through business and immigration.

What is the starting point for approaching other religions? When looking at another religion we should not start with an assumption that we

are opposites or unable to communicate, in a zero-sum duality like Elijah's choice on Mount Carmel. We should not assume irreducible differences, rather potential commonality. The preferred method is to let us first know each other and see the commonalities and then, and only then, deal with irreconcilable differences. Even then, differences can be used to create binary opposition or drive a wedge, or they can be seen as two alternative paths to the same goal.

Many forms of looking at another religion seek to fit religions into universal patterns. My approach does not assume commonality and even presumptively assumes that they have little in common. I generally assume that Judaism, as are most religions, is a system, in which each works by its own rules. So even when I see a commonality between two religions, I understand the common practice as belonging to two different structures. I can recognize similar practices to my own Judaism and other practices that are quite different.

When I attempt to explain Hinduism in Jewish terms, I look at it with Jewish eyes and ask what they mean to a Jewish observer. I assume that my readers are not experts in Indian thought or Hinduism, nor am I an expert on Hinduism. I do not have the philological skills to handle the several required languages of Hinduism. Besides, Hinduism is too diverse and complex to contain in any one presentation. Everything was done in translation and therefore does not follow the rules of a rigorous comparative theology. Do not consider this book as the last word on anything; continue the encounter.

I ask my readers to consider opening themselves up to a new way of looking at religion, new possibilities of thought.

Method

I lived in Banares, an Orthodox city of Temples, educated Brahmins in the university, and ritual practitioners. I also spent time in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu in the south of India and in the northern Indian holy cities of Haridwar and Rishikesh in Uttarakhand, as well as observing Nepalese

Hinduism in Katmandu. In addition, I visited many other cities and regions for shorter periods of time including Delhi, Mumbai, Kerala, and Jaipur.

English was the official language of instruction and academic writing in India and Nepal. I was studying in a major Indian university religion department that taught what they considered Orthodox Hindu thought to a classroom of Hindus. I had the chance to speak to many students in and out of the classroom. They naturally offered their own religious opinions contrasting their Hindu beliefs to the Judaism that I was teaching.

This book focuses on the 96 percent of Hindu practitioners who are members of some version of Shaivism or Vaishnavism, who follow the Agamic and Puranic practices. Knowledge of Hinduism was everywhere. Books and picture guides of how to observe Hindu *dharma* properly were available in almost every bookstore, as well as explanations of *dharma* in newspapers columns, dramatic performances and posters on the walls of the temple. I also came to know law and lore through visiting people to see their family practice. Just as a traditional Jew knew the ritual order from family practice, possessing rudimentary prayer book knowledge without Talmudic mastery, so too Hindus know their own practices even if they cannot read the Sanskrit texts.

In addition, I spoke to temple priests, ritual priests for burning the dead, storekeepers, rickshaw drivers, local Sanskrit scholars, and wandering holy men (*sadhus*). I let taxi drivers take me to where they personally worshipped, I spoke to pilgrims outside temples and let fellow faculty tell me about their own observances. Concerning rituals, I spoke to both middle-class practitioners as well as pujari (priests performing the ritual) and corroborated their views with popular Hindu books.

There is no reason to be suspicious of their answers, especially since I subsequently found the same answers in up-to-date academic anthropological studies of contemporary Hindu practices.

This book avoids the popular orientalist projection that Indian religion has two separate religions, a narrow philosophic religion and a popular religion of the masses. Not only do I have theoretical objections to such an approach, but my many encounters show that many ordinary people know and reflect upon the ordinary tenets of their faith while the intellectual elite frequently take part in popular practice. I especially integrate the mid-brow worship of local festivals, syncretic gurus, such as Sai Baba, and worship of

the *pipal* tree as vital elements of Hinduism.

As a corollary, this book does not focus on the philosophic religion of the sophisticated *advaitan* thinkers of some select ashrams to the exclusion of the Hinduism of the Temple, suburban family, market, and university.

In my interpretations, I use my own experience and approach to Judaism as the basis for my observations. For example, I had to choose the exemplar religious person who is engaged in the study of sacred Hindu writings. Most photographs of India take pictures of the colorful *sadhus*, sitting outside, chanting from a colorful paper chapbook, rather than the trained *pandit* with his computer, shelves of books, piles of notes, and power-point lecture plans, who is training the next generation.

Looking at the situation with my specific Jewish eyes I prefer to typify Jewish learning by the Yeshiva student and congregation, rather than the colorful person sitting by the Western Wall with a book open before him. I am skeptical of the educational level and motivation for the person sitting and begging by the Western Wall. So too, I prefer as a reliable source of Hinduism the trained scholar and his students, not the semi-literate *sadhu*. (I did however speak with many *sadhus* and ascertained that many of those posing for tourists did not possess a depth of knowledge, but rather were living their ascetic lives due to piety or lack of financial resources.)

In many of my other decisions, I trusted my Jewish eyes favoring the educated and middle-class family over the colorful. I am a theologian not an ethnographer. I think about religion textually and theologically not ethnographically. This encounter was mediated by books. Yet, pizza, pilgrims, and school plays let me make many ethnographic observations as I read my books.

The Hinduism that I predominantly encountered in the area in which I lived was *Mimamsa* Hinduism, the Hinduism of ritual observance. My neighbors went to Temple, prayed daily, and kept the festivals, dietary laws, and purity laws. There, observant Hindus are not vestiges of ancient religion, rather the contemporary formulations of an ancient faith, similar to my own observance of Judaism. I am not attempting to be a critical historian of Vedic texts or discuss ancient Vedic religion. I am looking at classic Hindu texts as understood in contemporary teaching.

In contrast to this ritual emphasis, most Western theological reflection on Hinduism, from the eighteenth century through the early twentieth

century, was done by Christian missionaries who oscillated between negative assessments of Hinduism as superstition or as lacking Christian salvation. In addition, they looked in Hinduism to seek the Indian version of the Christian concepts of incarnation, grace, trinity, and salvation, not ritual.

Many Western books still confuse *Advaita* with all of Hinduism, and thereby label Hinduism as mysticism, monism, or as only a transcendental philosophy. I focus on the overwhelming majority of Hindus who are Shaivite and Vaishnava theists serving a theistic God in love and duty. I am looking at religious law, ritual, intention, study, dietary rules, and the integration of observance and philosophy, traditional Jewish topics.

The goal is to not make Hinduism look strange and primitive. Instead the goal is to help defend against those making it seem strange, so too Judaism should not make itself strange to Hinduism and should defend against those making Judaism strange to the dharmic religions.

BETWEEN HINDUISM AND JUDAISM

A few words about Hinduism and monotheism. Judaism takes great pride in not worshiping idols. It is right there at the beginning of the Ten Commandments: “Thou shalt have no other gods before Me. Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image, nor any manner of likeness, of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Exod. 20:3–5). And the psalms are full of mockery. “Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men’s hands. They have mouths, but they speak not.” (Psalms 115:4–8).

It is not a surprise, then, that Jews are discomfited by Hindu religion, with its devotional statues and images dedicated to Shiva, Vishnu, and myriads of other less prominent deities.

If you ask a Hindu about the image of a deity, whether in their home or in a temple, they might say the image is just the way to direct your heart or they may say that the divine needs to be manifest for human’s to worship. In contemporary India, everyone understands these are representations. Yet at the same time, they are embodiments given a presence of the living God, even the natural realm is divine.

Western views of Indian religion are not helped by the choices made by the graphic designers, who tend to put images of ancient dancing gods on

the covers of books about Hinduism. Those are generally decorations on the outside of buildings, or masks used in drama performances rather than the actual ones used in worship. Imagine if we took pictures of lions on the outsides of the Torah ark, pictures of cherubs, or zodiacs from old synagogues, and put them on the cover of a book about Judaism as a representation of the Jewish deity.

However, Hindus see these questions about monotheism and idolatry as incredibly judgmental and provincial, because they start the conversation by judging Indian religion by Western conceptions. Hindus want Westerners to recognize how they focus on a personal God; or how they pray, seek grace or repent before God. They resent how Western textbooks do not present them as concerned with charity, good deeds, helping one another, and family life, and how much they're doing all that to help gain a theistic God's merit or love.

This book does not seek to address how Hinduism relates to the Rabbinic category of *avodah zarah* (foreign worship). The goal is to understand the wisdom and diversity of Hinduism through Jewish eyes.^[7] This book will emphasize this diversity of Hinduism and the separate denominations.

Biblical Comparison

How would you explain the diversity in Western biblical terms? Here is a little thought experiment. This is not intended to make fun of the Bible or Hinduism. Nor is its goal to subject Hinduism to the Bible. This is an attempt to explain diversity in a Western context, moving beyond Western exclusivity and divisions between believer/pagan. These are hypothetical and are not my beliefs or historically true.

How would Hinduism react to biblical stories? When Jeroboam set up his golden calves in Beth El and Dan, the Bible condemned it as unfaithfulness to the Temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 12). However, what if this was the Indian subcontinent?

The response to Jeroboam would have been "It's a great idea! Maybe we should have a separate temple every day's journey through the country." More temples are a blessing and private altars make worship even more

convenient. The twentieth-century Indian author, Radhakrishnan, wrote that India is not a tiny country like the biblical land so it needs shrines everywhere so that the people can get to them.

Alternatively, consider the prohibitions in Deuteronomy and Kings about pillars, trees, minor deities, astral deities, and spirits. Imagine if the response had been to not worry about them too much. The Indian reaction throughout history would either be acceptance of worshiping using physical forms or at least tolerance, in that, they consider that the common people will eventually learn to move beyond them slowly, very slowly. Golden calves, pillars, and trees are fine forms of worship for most people. Even the worship of spirits and serpents should be either accepted or tolerated. (Maimonides takes a similar approach in his *Guide of the Perplexed* toward tolerating sacrifices in the Bible.)

King Hezekiah demolished the bronze serpent that Moses had created, because people had been burning incense to it right up until that time. In India, these practices would have endured and would likely still be done today.

Elijah

Elijah and the priests of Baal staged a showdown between two competing religions of whose sacrifice will be consumed. Imagine if Elijah and the priests of Baal had said, “There’s only one God over everything. Why are we fighting?” So let us put away differences and merge all the cults of the high god Baal into the biblical cult. We will also combine our scripture and even produce various versions of the scriptures with different narratives based on different denominations. We will all affirm the biblical universalism of Malachi 1:11 “My name will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to me, because my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord Almighty.” It is all the same God despite different cults, nations, and names.

In this alternate scenario, all of the various Aramaean nations, together with Moab, Ammon, and the Philistines, become one religion by joining with the biblical religion. The new combined religion will give some deference to Jerusalem but each member will keep its own cultic practices. We would have also included in this new unity the Hittites, whose language is close to Hebrew. Yes, they have many gods and a completely different form of worship than the Aramaean religions; in fact, the Hittites have a thousand gods. Yet, over time, they will become one with the biblical perspective.

Ezra and Alexander the Great

In this hypothetical counter-history, Ezra never asked anyone to put away foreign wives and never sought to limit foreign worship practices. Imagine, if he saw strength through including many different people and diverse practices in the Jerusalem cult. When Ezra read the Torah in public, he sought to bring it to every nation that he could. He only asked each group to accept it as best as their culture could, allowing them to create alternate versions. He acknowledged that only the Jerusalem priests truly kept everything properly, but he relaxed the rules for everyone else.

In addition, Second Temple Judaism had priests, royalty, apocalyptic visionaries, Qumran, Sadducees, Nazirite ascetics and proto-rabbinic scribes. Historically only the writings of the scribes become the cultural resource for future Jews. However, what if all these competing groups had survived? Further, consider if the Mishnah, written from a Jerusalem point of view, was seen as authoritative. However, many parts in this harmonious empire belonging to other Second Temple groups felt no need to study or follow it in practice.

To consider later centuries, imagine that even when Judaism and Christianity divided, it still did not matter. Then imagine that Christianity never became the religion of the Roman Empire and just another offshoot of this complex Jerusalem religion.

Now imagine that between the seventh and seventeenth centuries all

these Near East and Mediterranean groups started converging even more and developing a common identity. Yet, the Jerusalem group with its scribes and priests keep up a purity of doctrines.

Finally, imagine that this region from Greece to Iraq gains liberation as a single country in the middle of the twentieth century, with a government that is going out of its way to downplay differences and claim everyone is biblical. For many reasons, they may have started creating ideologies of a single identity already in the thirteenth century and solidified in the seventeenth century, but now this unity was written into textbooks and law.

Hinduism came to be in a similar fashion to my hypothetical biblical story. But Judaism did not go that way. From Jeroboam to Mishnah and beyond, Judaism always chose the particularistic and exclusivist direction. Judaism was always in theory aniconic, iconoclastic, and opposed to popular cults.

In reality, the ancient Judiasms of Elephantine in Egypt, Qumran in the desert, or Sadducees in Jerusalem did not continue as separate denominations in the contemporary era of Judaism. Finally, Judaism also maintained a tight sense of unity of its teachings compared to Hinduism. In Judaism, the various traditions of Jewish philosophy, Kabbalah, and law did not become completely diverse paths.

Abraham

Let me tell one more story, the famous story of Abraham shattering the idols of his father Terach (Gen. 11:26). All three Abrahamic faiths tell this story based on Second Temple period sources. Here is a truncated Jewish version.

Abraham, as a lad, came to the realization that there is one eternal God in the heaven and the earth greater than any earthly force. Abraham's father Terach was an idol maker. Once, Terach had to leave his shop and left Abraham to mind the shop in his place. A person would come and wish to buy an idol. Abraham asked him: How old are you? He would reply: I am

sixty years old. Abraham would say: Woe to that man who is sixty years old and wishes to bow to something that is one day old! The person would be embarrassed and go away.

One time a certain woman came along carrying a dish of fine flour. She said to him: Come and offer this to them. He went and took a rod and broke all the statues, and placed the rod in the hand of the largest one of them. When his father returned, he said to him: Who did this to them? Abraham said, I cannot lie to you. A certain woman came carrying a dish of fine flour, and said to me: Go offer this to them. I offered it to them: this one said "I will eat first"; and that one said, "I will eat first." The largest among them got up, took the rod, and broke the others. His father answered him: Why are you making a fool out of me! Do these idols know anything! Abraham replied: Let your ears hear what your mouth says!

My addenda to understand Hinduism:

Terach: Abraham! Are you a moron? The Hindu statues are used to bring the infinite Divine to mind. We need a representation in our minds. We can only show true devotion to a human image.

Abraham: But there is only one immaterial God.

Terach: But we live in a sensory material world. We need physical representation to worship. That is why God will give in the Torah a command to construct a Tabernacle. God will also give physical commandments in order to serve with physicality. So here, we also have physical statues.

Abraham: But you think they are actually alive!

Terach: Give me a break. They are wood and clay. Only when they are brought to the Temple and consecrated in a special ceremony do they become divine. Now they are still in the workshop. They are not robots with moving parts. Really, Abraham, have you ever seen an idol or a golden calf move? Your straw man arguments do not work. Do the Cherubim move in the Tabernacle?

Abraham: Yes, they do. Cherubim in the Tabernacle turn toward each other and away from each other (BT *Bava Batra* 99a).

Terach: Boy you are really anthropomorphic. In order not to take religion anthropomorphically you better read Maimonides's *Guide for the Perplexed* or maybe Shankara's commentary on the *Brahma*

Sutra or even the *Lakshmi Tantra*.

Abraham: But what about the thousands of plaster and clay little idols that Hindus make for home shrines and for stores? Aren't people worshipping those?

Terach: They serve as a reminder of the god and help focus on a specific aspect. They are changed regularly. The ones they use for festivals are even dissolved in the river when they are finished using them to show that the image has no intrinsic value. The little ones they leave out in the rain under trees to show that they have no holiness after they are used. You treat many religious objects like *tefillin* in a more intrinsic manner.

Abraham: But she brought them food to eat. Can they eat?

Terach: She said offer it to them. Tabernacle sacrifices are also offerings but God does not come down and eat it. You were the one who says she thought they actually ate. She just said bring them an offering. You seem to treat your ritual as pure and assume that others are naïve. If you visit a foreign culture, try to understand them in a charitable way and assume that the people are on the same level of sophistication as you.

Abraham: But I discovered the God of heaven and earth and everyone else is primitive. I get to correct them. I get to show my elders the right way.

Terach: You are not alone in discovering an immaterial God. The Greek philosophers since Xenophanes (6th century BCE) already had this conception of God. In India, the Upanishads already had a singular immaterial divine *Brahman* behind everything. But you don't see them going around breaking things. I cannot wait until you are out of adolescence. Remember Abraham, if God ever says to you to offer your son on a mountain, please think about what the word offering may mean.

Maimonides and Hinduism

Let us now try this in the other direction. What parts of Judaism are most Hindu? Let us look at Maimonides classic work *Mishnah Torah*, which opens with the following:

“The Foundation of Foundations and the Pillar of all Wisdom is to know that there is a First Cause (Primordial Being) and that He brought about all that is. And all that exists, of heaven and earth and what is between, exist only on the account of the Truth of His Being” (Yesodei HaTorah 1:1). Later Maimonides writes “What is the way to love and fear God? Whenever one contemplates the great wonders of God’s works and creations, and one sees that they are a product of a wisdom that has no bounds or limits, one will immediately love, laud and glorify [God] with an immense passion to know the Great Name.” (Yesodei HaTorah 2:2).

Maimonides true path of worship advocates that the individual self should attain a contemplative knowledge of the divine, working to overcome materiality through knowledge. Maimonides, the philosophic theist, advocates philosophic contemplation, love of God, and knowledge of His name. How would this be read in Hinduism? For the Hindu, this is the core of religion. Many Hindu works teach the truth that God alone exists. Nothing is real as God is real. God alone is Being. The Hindu reader of Maimonides would say this is equivalent to the study of the many Hindu classics of how there is one divine reality, how divine immanence works, how to engage in *bhakti*, and the impermanence of the world around us.

For Judaism to be closer to Hinduism, it would need to have study halls where God, and His absolute Being and his truth is the full time course of study. To approximate the Hindu approaches to religion, the Jewish study hall would consist of studying the statements about God and human perfection as found in the texts of Midrash, Saadya, Bahye, Maimonides, and Gersonides combined with the study of *Zohar*, Cordovero, Musar, and Hasidut.

However, most modern Jews do not focus on the indwelling of divinity, nor do most see wonder or awaken love of God in their lives. In actual contemporary Judaism, synagogue life, *halakhah*, tikkun olam, and community building has replaced any medieval contemplative approach.

Furthermore, Judaism does not have serious traditions of breath training, physical fitness, or mastery of the body as part of this contemplation. Nor does Judaism, at this contemporary point, take kindly to traditions of celibacy, seclusion, or leaving society to be a holy man.

To be fair to Judaism and not privilege Hinduism, before I proceed with the rest of the book, I must state the clear and immense differences between Hinduism and Judaism.

In the Jewish narrative, there is a covenant between God, who actively seeks out to a specific people, the Jews. God calls to Abraham who answers the call. In turn, Moses accepts God's call to lead the people and then the entire Jewish people pledge allegiance to God's will at a revelation at Sinai. A specific act of God took the Jewish people out from Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, showing chosen peoplehood, miracles, divine providence, and a special intimacy between God and His people. He brought them to the holy land and had them build a Temple for Him . . . Jewish liturgy affirms this theology of God, Torah, and Israel daily, on the Sabbath, and annually at the Passover Seder. Judaism affirms human responsibility for building society and sees human action as crucial. Judaism has a strong contractual character even though it transcends strict legal contract, in that, God dignifies human life and offers a personal relationship with God.

These aspects characterize Judaism in contrast to Hinduism. I could write an entire volume about these differences, but then it would be a very different book.

PRIOR ENCOUNTERS

Israelite trade with India dates back to biblical times, most notably King Solomon's imports from Tamil Nadu of ivory (1 Kings 10:22), while Song of Songs delights in invoking Indian fragrances of nard and saffron (4:14).

The Middle Ages and Early Modern Period

During the Middle Ages Jews knew about various aspects of Indian religions through the Arabic and Persian mediators. The Muslim scholar Al-Biruni (c. 973–1048) translated a number of Sanskrit works into Arabic—including selections from Patanjali's *Yogasutras* and the *Bhagavad Gita*—as

part of his encyclopedic treatise on India.

The crucial point of these translations is the fact that Al-Biruni renders the Sanskrit gods (*deva*) with the Arabic terms for angels (*mala'ikah*) or spiritual beings (*ruhaniyyat*), a theological shift aiding in their acceptance. Christian works of the colonial and modern periods translated the word *deva* as gods, so as to imply a polytheism, the Judeo-Arabic world knew the varieties of Indian belief as the one God of the Upanishads with the myriad *devas* as mere intermediaries. In addition, most medieval Muslim theologians expanded People of the Book to include Hinduism, allowing for a comparison in scripture.

The following is a brief summary of prior encounters from the Middle Ages until the twentieth century. In my prior book *Judaism and World Religions*, I give a full annotated discussion of these prior texts, here I will briefly mention a few highlights.

Saadia Gaon (d. 942), leader of Babylonian Jewry, correctly presents several Hindu theological positions in his work. Notably, he seems to have an understanding of actual practices of the Indian subcontinent. He mentions the Brahmins and Hindu ritual practices. He mentions that their doctrine of theism as presented in the *Nyaya* school (see below on *Nyaya*) and he criticizes them for lacking prophecy. Saadia's works reflect the theologically complex world of cosmopolitan humanistic Baghdad where interfaith meetings brought together Asian religions with Middle Eastern faiths.^[8]

The most popular medieval work of this genre of translations was *Kalilah wa-Dimnah*, which was based on Indian fables contained in the *Panchatantra* (circa 300 CE). These are stories of the young prince turning to the ascetic for guidance. According to Abraham ibn Ezra, a Jew had translated it directly from Sanskrit into Arabic.

Yehudah Halevi, author of the eleventh century defense of Judaism book known as the *Kuzari*, chooses Indian culture as an example of something that we only know by reliable witnesses due to India's remoteness, but also because of the great mysterious wisdom that was traditionally attributed to the Indian sages. Casually he mentions that Indian culture is "hundreds of thousands of years old" and that they have "idols, talismans, and witchcraft." Elsewhere Halevi views the Indians as idolatrous pagans and a

“dissolute, unreliable people,” lacking any credibility.^[9]

Treating India as the land of ancient wisdom, Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera, in his work, *Ethical Epistle*, written in the thirteenth century, brings a story about an old man who suddenly appears out of nowhere. When asked about his origins, he answers: “I am from the land of India, from the seed of ancient sages. All my ancestors had ancient beliefs, but only I am left, a prophet of wisdom, an old man of cunning.”^[10]

There is an entire range of early fourteenth-century Spanish thinkers that followed the thought of Abraham ibn Ezra, who explains the religions of India as a form of magic. None of these authors are famous and influential; however, the approach has echoed in many citations and paraphrases in later literature. For example, Rabbi Yosef Tov Elam (fourteenth-century Spain) comments that: “the way of the wise men of India is to make mental forms at specific times to bring down the power of the stars” but he recoils by writing: “I know a little to teach and not to do, because it is truly idolatry.”^[11] A similar statement is found in the writings of his contemporary, Menachem Tamar, who claims “I met a Jew from India who told me that these things exist there. They make images at specific times and the form speaks.”^[12]

Skipping ahead to the age of exploration, Amsterdam rabbi and widely read scholar Menashe ben Israel (1604–1657) was a universalist concerning religions, finding a common core behind diverse practices. He read the accounts by Pedro Teixeira, a Portuguese Christian, who visited India and wrote a book in 1610 expressing only disdain for the religious practices he observed, calling them “absurdities,” “follies and superstitions,” and “diabolical ceremonies.” In contrast, Menashe saw commonalities with Judaism. Menashe reads Teixeira and records the same practices with approval because, for him, they attest to an underlying universal doctrine.

Menashe created the widespread kabbalistic myth that Asian religions were gifts given by Abraham to his concubines. The book of Jubilees and the *Zohar* record that Abraham gave magical practices to his children who headed East, in the original to Arabia or Persia. In his version, cited by many twentieth century popular works such as Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan (d. 1983) the journey was to India and the gifts was meditative practices and other aspects of Asian religions. Menashe finds common doctrines with Eastern

religions showing how Jews and Hindus share belief in transmigration; he also finds Hindu views compassionate at their core.

David d'Beth Hillel (mid-nineteenth century), a member of the group of Lithuanian expatriates who came to live in the land of Israel under the inspiration of the Gaon of Vilna, undertook a journey eastward through Afghanistan to India. Once in India, he stayed long enough to learn about the local religions. He concludes that the Hindus had one God at the time of Adam based on the Hindu literature and from there digressed into having lower deities under a supreme God.

Another wandering Lithuanian Jew whose family also moved to Israel, Yaakov Saphir (1822–1885), was given a Middle Eastern education including fluency in Arabic and had undertaken a journey eastward. Saphir shared many views of the Christian missionaries about Indian religion as “idolatry in every house . . . carved from stone, or wood, or metal standing on the wall or on the table and a lamp burning continuously before them. Every morning before any activity or eating they place a food offering.”^[13]

Positive Encounter in the Modern Era

Moses Mendelssohn argued over two centuries ago that Hindus were not polytheists but monotheists who worship God through a misunderstood system of symbols to express divine providence. Mendelssohn argued that images of the divine in Hinduism are symbolic the same way the rabbinic stories of the cherubim embracing are symbolic. Symbolism is part of a healthy human understanding of God. An outsider would misconstrue the story of the cherubs as literal, so too Westerners misconstrue the symbolic nature of Hinduism.

Mendelssohn thought the Bible only forbids imagery to Jews following Nahmanides and he extended the tosafist idea of *shituf* to Hinduism. Modern Jews were actually much better readers of Hindu symbolism than their Protestant contemporaries were. The latter used Hinduism to attack Catholicism, ritual, and representation. Jews, such as Mendelssohn, who were in favor of ritual had little to gain by attacking Hindu ritual.^[14]

Maurice Fluegel (c. 1831–1911) was an Orthodox rabbi in Baltimore who gave up the rabbinate in order to pursue scholarly interests in

comparing *Vedanta* and Kabbalah. He treated both as a form of perennialism, where all religions trace their origins to common, ancient roots. His work, *The Philosophy of Qabbala and Vedanta*, remains a late nineteenth-century curiosity. He compares the Vedic *Brahman* to the *Zohar's* Infinite, Unknowable *Eyn Sof*. Fluegel still acknowledges the traditional Jewish view that the myriad *devas* are angels.

In the twentieth century, Ezriel Gruenzig (c. 1868–1931), head of the Mizrahi Tahkemoni School in Antwerp and editor of the journal *Ha-Eshkol*, was a conduit of Western and academic knowledge to his Hebrew-reading rabbinic audience. In 1900, he wrote an appreciation of the recently published works belonging to the series *Sacred Books of the East* edited under the direction of Max Muller. He compares the Hindu positively to Judaism, noting the similarities of the two religious worldviews Kabbalah and Hinduism, especially emanation, nirvana, *eynsof*, *sefirot*, and theories of the soul. Gruenzig's approach consists of focusing on the philosophic works and the ancient scripture to formulate a Hindu monotheism as part of a larger perennialist vision.

Many modern Jewish thinkers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries such as Rabbis Kaufman Koehler, Leo Baeck and Abba Hillel Silver castigated Asian religions as passive, otherworldly, nihilistic, and not having a sufficient ethical system.

Azriel Carlebach (d. 1955) was the editor of *Ma'ariv*, one of Israel's leading daily newspapers, and wrote "India: Account of a Voyage." Carlebach's description of India was, for decades, the only Israeli account and shaped their image of India. Carlebach had been ordained as a rabbi in his youth by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, hence his contribution is that he applied his rabbinical knowledge and used biblical and rabbinic terms to refer to parallel institutions and rituals in the Hindu religious tradition. He translated Hindu temples and priests using the biblical words temples (*mikdashim*) and its priests.

Nathan Katz, a professor of Indian religions who returned to Jewish observance offers a cultural bridge between Judaism and Indian faiths, and has made himself the hub of Indo-Judaic studies. Katz's approach is mainly ethnographic, yet he does offer the following reflections:

When the swami speaks of G-d as the Light, beyond all form and

distinctions, the initial understanding is put into question. And the more one delves into the philosophies underlying Hindu practice, the more the initial level is reduced to a comic book version of a profound and serious theology. . . . I knew beyond any doubt that Hinduism teaches a way of being in the world that is consonant with the Biblical principle that we humans are all created b'tselem Elokim, in the image of G-d. Whatever we may think of her more mundane religious practices, it cannot be denied that Hinduism creates a cultured human whose actions honor both humans and our Creator.

[\[15\]](#)

Katz calls us to begin the discussion in earnest and to realize that our first perceptions are not necessary accurate.

Meditation

Jewish returnees from Indian ashrams, who brought with them the influence of Eastern forms of yoga and meditation, generated a new series of halakhic questions. A permissive answer came from Rabbi Hayyim David Halevi (b. 1924), former Sefardi Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, who wrote that: "The initiation ceremony of Transcendental Meditation, and similarly the mantra given to the meditator, has absolute colorings of idolatry, forbidden when used for a forbidden purpose. The technique of Transcendental Meditation, however, by itself is not forbidden."[\[16\]](#) Halevi distinguishes the techniques of meditation from the religious aspects, the realm of ritual or allegiance to a guru.

It is interesting to note that Rabbi Halevi's practical response produced a theoretical statement on the difference between the two faiths as being the difference between Hinduism that "encourages a person to empty his mind from continuous daily thoughts . . . focus on a specific mantra . . . to attain emptiness. But Judaism attains that by filling him with holy feelings of the Divine existence." For Halevi, "The technique of Transcendental

Meditation, however, by itself is not forbidden, if a person does it without the initiation ceremony, and without the guidance of those teachers [gurus].”^[17]

Hindu-Jewish Summit

A major leap was made on February 5–6, 2007, at the first Hindu-Jewish Leadership Summit that took place in Delhi consisting of a delegation of the chief rabbinate of Israel with major religious leaders of the Hindu *dharma*. Chief Rabbi Yona Metzger said although interreligious dialogue has increased recently, the Hindu-Jewish declaration is a significant move, which highlights the necessity of expanding interfaith community to eastern traditions. This meeting led to a “Declaration of Mutual Understanding and Cooperation from the First Jewish–Hindu Leadership Summit.”^[18]

The document was remarkable as an Orthodox Jewish acknowledgment that Hinduism accepts one Supreme Being, and that there exists commonality between Jewish and Hindu revelation and ethics. In fact, during the first Hindu-Jewish summit meeting, the Israeli chief rabbi with a full rabbinical delegation visited the Delhi Akshardham Temple complex.

A second Hindu-Jewish Leadership Summit took place in Jerusalem on February 17–20, 2008. In this meeting, the leaders went further in their declarations and considered Hinduism as a shared “Creator and Guide of the Cosmos.”

The participants reaffirmed their commitment to deepening this bilateral relationship predicated on the recognition of one Supreme Being, Creator and Guide of the Cosmos; shared values; and similar historical experiences. “It is recognized that the One Supreme Being, both in its formless and manifest aspects, has been worshipped by Hindus over the millennia. This does not mean that Hindus worship ‘gods’ and ‘idols.’ The Hindu relates to only the One Supreme Being when he/she prays to a particular manifestation.”^[19]

There was a third Hindu-Jewish Leadership Summit in New York on June

17, 2009, which I attended. At that meeting, the Hindu representatives shared the perception that Christians engage in aggressive proselytizing and have a hidden conversionary agenda in interfaith activity. Even now, in the United States, Hindus complain that they face aggressive missionary campaigns. They felt that Jews understand their concerns about proselytizing. Nathan Katz notes that, “when Jews and Hindus converse, there are no ulterior motives [. . .] The Hindu-Jewish dialogue is also about our experiences of oppression and intolerance” from other faiths.

The Hindu representatives emphasized that they can learn from Jews about building community as a diaspora minority in America. More importantly, they wanted to fight anti-Hinduism and change the derogatory descriptions of Hinduism in textbooks. The new substantive interfaith theme was to convey to the Jewish participants that the swastika is an ancient Hindu symbol of auspicious times, which originally had nothing to do with Nazis.

What should we make of these meetings? Did either side understand the other side? Was it all diplomatic? For some observers, the rabbis at the summit never affirmed that both sides worship the same God rather only a recognition of the same one Supreme Being. The swamis sought to impart that Hindus do not worship idols but the one supreme God, in formless and manifest forms, but that is not the way Jews speak of the divine. Critics of the events from both sides each claim that their side was not educated enough about the other side to engage in the discussion.

My take at the time was that the summits show a broad openness for approaching Hinduism by the Jewish participants but the statement is likely to become substantially more qualified or restricted when there is greater familiarity by the rabbis with the huge variety of Hindu thought. The swamis who engaged in the Hindu-Jewish dialogue all gave Smarta answers about their worship, some of the rabbis assumed this was the only Hindu theological position.

Secondly, the Jewish community did not know what to expect. For example, in the New York meeting there were some swamis who would not be in the same room as women, while others gladly shared the podium with female Hindu leaders. All the swamis considered the kosher tuna wraps as meat, forbidden to a vegetarian; others would eat only the fresh fruit, since they would not eat even vegetarian food cooked with utensils that might

have been used to serve their forbidden foods.

Finally, these early summits were not greatly published on the Jewish side nor even translated into Hebrew for the Israeli public. This book treats the encounters as an initial ice-breaking meeting but does not place too much emphasis on the content of the encounters.

NOTES

1. Alan Brill, *Judaism and Other Religions: Models of Understanding* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2010); Alan Brill, *Judaism and World Religions: Christianity, Islam, and Eastern Religions* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2012).

2. This book on Jewish-Hindu encounter is best read with an introduction to Hinduism at one's side. The following are books for further reading and serve as the base of information that this book is based upon.

The following seven works are the basic scholarly introductions, which I have found most helpful. Klaus Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism* (Albany: SUNY, 1994) is the introductory textbook for an advanced undergraduate class or graduate classroom. This book is the most thorough and complete of any other book. Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996) is an introduction to Hindu religious books, legal literature, and ideas. C. J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1992) is the best introduction to popular religion and best for dispelling the myths about popular Hindu religion. Axel Michaels, *Hinduism: Past and Present* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004) offers an anthropological introduction and focuses on Nepal instead of on India. Julius Lipner, *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 1994) is a thematic introduction; Sushil Mittal, *The Hindu World*, ed. Gene Thursby (London: Routledge, 2004); Krishna Sivaraman, *Hindu Spirituality: Vedas through Vedanta* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) and *Hindu Spirituality: Postclassical and Modern* (New York: Crossroad, 1997).

The following three books present Hinduism from an insider's perspective similar to an introduction to Judaism written by a pulpit rabbi. Bansai Pandit, *The Hindu Mind* (New Delhi: Dharma Publications, 2005) is an essential introduction explaining all basic facets of Hinduism. The work is highly

readable and the best place to start. Swami Sivananda, *All about Hinduism* (Rishikesh: Divine Life, 1997) is a rapid overview of all the topics in the books including texts, philosophies, practice, and ethics; a modern Hindu summary. Chandrasekharendra Saraswati, *Hindu Dharma: The Universal Way of Life* (Mumbai: Bhavan Book University, 1995) is a classic defense of an Orthodox Hindu life based on following Shankara's teachings and living an austere life. These are almost 800 pages of oral lectures first published in 1940 and revised.

[3.](#) David Levinson, *Religion: A Cross-Cultural Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 58.

[4.](#) *The Life of Hinduism*, Edited by John Stratton Hawley and Narayanan Vasudha (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006) 9.

[5.](#) Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 1.

[6.](#) On the current field of comparative theology, see Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Chichester, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); idem, *Hindu God, Christian God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

For a work attempting a broad Hindu-Catholic encounter, in many ways similar to this book, I recommend Mariasusai Dhavamony, *Classical Hinduism* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1982).

A classical comparative author that worked with Christian categories imposed on Hinduism are the writings of Rudolph Otto, see *India's Religion of Grace and Christianity Compared and Contrasted*, trans. F. H. Foster (New York; London, 1930); idem, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism*, trans. B. L. Bracey and R. C. Payne (New York, 1932).

For recent Hindu-Jewish comparisons, see Theodor Ithamar and Yudit Kornberg Greenberg, eds., *Dharma and Halacha: Comparative Studies in Hindu and Jewish Philosophy and Religion* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018). Moreover, see the older studies in Hananya Goodman, ed., *Between Jerusalem and Benares: Comparative Studies in Judaism and Hinduism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

[7.](#) An upcoming valuable book on the topic is Rabbi Daniel Sperber, *The Halachic Status of Hinduism* (forthcoming).

[8.](#) Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 16, 172.

- [9.](#) Yehudah Halevi, *Kuzari* I:60–62.
- [10.](#) Shem Tov ibn Falaquera, *Ethical Epistle (Iggeret ha-Musar)* ed. A. M. Habermann, *Kovetz Al Yad* 1(n.s.) (Jerusalem, 1936), 76–78, cited in Abraham Melamed, “The Image of India in Medieval Jewish Culture,” *Jewish History*, 20:3–4, (December 2006), 299–314.
- [11.](#) Dov Schwartz, *Astrologyah u-magyah* (Ramat-Gan: Universitat Bar-Ilan, 1999) 170.
- [12.](#) Dov Schwartz, *Astrologyah*, 214.
- [13.](#) Jacob Saphir, *Even Sapir: masotav ha-muflaim shel Yaaqov Sapir ha-Levi be-Teman* (Jerusalem: Yehoshua Kohen, 1989) 51–54; 116.
- [14.](#) Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, or, On Religious Power and Judaism*, Alexander Altmann, intro.; Allan Arkush, trans. (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press by University Press of New England, 1983) 112–115 and *Biur* Exodus 20:3. Mendelssohn explicitly relies on Nahmanides to forbid images only to Jews and he relies on the Tosfot concept of *shituf* to permit images to Hindus, extending the discussion of Christianity to Hinduism.
- [15.](#) Nathan Katz “Jerusalem in Benares” in *Tikkun* (May–June 2007), 23–25, 68–70.
- [16.](#) Hayyim David Halevi, *Meqor Hayim: piske halakhot ha-nehutsot be-yoter* (Tel Aviv: 1983), 179–180.
- [17.](#) Hayyim David Halevi, *Meqor Hayim*, 179–180.
- [18.](#) Seventy-three-page report on the 2007 summit online at http://www.millenniumpeacesummit.org/1st-Hindu-Jewish_Summit_Report-Final.pdf. The second 2008 conference of 76 pages is here at http://www.hindujewish.com/pdfs/2nd-Hindu-Jewish_Summit_Report-Final-print.pdf and the third 2009 conference is briefly reported here at <http://www.swaminarayangukul.org/news/3rd-hindu-jewish-leadership-summit-us>.
- [19.](#) http://www.hindujewish.com/pdfs/2nd-Hindu-Jewish_Summit_Report-Final-print.pdf.

Chapter 2

Vedic Worldview

SOUND AND WORD

The origins of Indian culture are the Indus Valley Civilization found in more than a thousand archeological sites. These remains from 2500 BCE are generally called by museums the Harappa era, based on one of the major sites. Much of the knowledge of the religion of this period is conjecture from the scant evidence of a mother earth goddess, a seated on a throne male figure, and ritual tanks possibility for purification. In the West, this is the era of Sumerian scribes writing on cylinders and the rise of the Canaanite civilization.

Vedic Period

The period of the early Vedic writings from 1500–1200 BCE had polytheistic elements along with monist, monotheistic, and skeptical trends. During this period, a group called the Aryans made their presence felt in India. Current scholarship places their origin as an indigenous northeastern group in India culturally ascendant over the Southern Dravidians. Older trends, especially under the influence of German racial-linguistic theories, portrayed them as outsiders from Central Asia.^[1]

During this period the earliest part of the Vedic literature was composed and then transmitted orally until the accepted editing around 500 BCE, this chronology roughly corresponds to the dates given by historians for the formation of the Hebrew Bible.

The term *Veda* means, to know, in this case, the knowledge is that of the ancient seers, the *rishis* or sages, who realized the eternal truths. Most narrowly, *Veda* refers to the four primary Brahmanic texts (*Samhitas*): the *Rig Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Sama Veda*, and *Atharva Veda*. Many subsequent writings, like the Upanishads, were included in the authoritative Vedic tradition. Over time, the meaning of *Veda* broadened to include a body of literature much larger than the core texts.

There are four major Vedas: *Rig Veda*, *Sama Veda*, *Yajur Veda* and *Atharva Veda*. The first three are what is usually included in the Western introduction to the Vedas, hymns to the ancient Vedic gods to be performed during sacrifice. Most of the sacrifices are complicated fire sacrifices involving building geometric patterns. In this literature, over a thousand *devas* are mentioned but less than ten were considered significant even then.

In turn, each of the four Vedas has four parts. The *Samhitas*, which are the aforementioned hymns and sacrifices, is a holy text beyond any ostensive meaning and is seen as holy and used as mantras. The *Brahmanas* give correct performance of the ritual and teach how this corresponds to an inherent order of creation called *dharma*. The *Aranyakas*, which literally means forest or wilderness, develops the *Brahmanas* with more ritual details and an esoteric level to the Vedas. These are rarely included in Western introductions due to their detail discussions of purity and worship rules including the *yajna* (sacred fire), but from my rabbinic background, these are crucial to understanding their ancient ritual system.

Vak or *Vac*, the eternal word, is speech, which is personified as Vāk, a goddess. Later Hinduism identifies her with the goddesses of wisdom Bharati or Sarasvati. Similarly, the biblical book of Proverbs personifies the eternal wisdom as a woman: “Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice? [. . .] To you, O people, I call out; I raise my voice to all mankind” (8:1, 4). But Jews do not treat the personified wisdom as a goddess.

Hindus consider the Vedas, including the Upanishads, as the eternal truth as Shruti means “that which is heard” as an eternal knowledge revealed to the *rsis* (the seers). They use the word Vedic in various ways as the word Torah has various meanings. Vedic can mean the spiritual core of Hinduism referring to either the entire corpus or the narrow sense as the Vedantic ideas of the Upanishads, similar to the way biblical and rabbinical literature can be limited to the early texts or can include millennium of commentary. Hindus scrutinize the Vedas for the meaning of life far beyond the ostensive discussions of sacrifice the same way Leviticus is still read and preached by contemporary Jews beyond its ancient practices. Non-Orthodox schools of Indian thought such as Buddhists, Jains, and Carvakas reject the

Vedas, turning away from ritual.^[2]

When one visits Stonehenge in England, one does not assume that contemporary Londoners are druids. One does not go into a suburban Jewish synagogue and look for high priests, goat offerings, a prophetic breastplate, or even Maccabees. One should not assume that contemporary Hinduism is still practiced in ancient ways.

Eternal Teachings and Oral Tradition

Like the pictures of Yemenite Jewish children memorizing the cantillation of the Torah, young Hindu boys sit in a group and memorize the correct cantillation of the Vedas. I witnessed such a chanting and recitation in an educational ashram complex in Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu. Boys, who must of have been between nine and ten years old, were reciting the Vedas by verse; a half-hour later in another part of the complex, I saw boys between the ages of fifteen and sixteen years old taking turns reciting whole chapters to their study partners and checking the actual text of the Vedas to correct their partner.

Traditional Jewish practice has similar practices of memorizing the Torah and Mishnah. While the practice of memorization was a necessity for study in the past, both religions still practice memorization as a way to show the sacredness of the texts even in an age of printed texts and digital resources. Both religions are devoted to the proper recitation of the ancient scripture in the original language with correct pronunciation and cantillation. In turn, prayer and worship make use of these powerful sacred words to access the divine. Jews have formal public cantillation of the Torah as do Hindus who have similar public recitations in temples.

Professor Barbara Holdrege, in her classic book *Torah and Veda* noted how both traditions see their primary texts, Torah and *Veda*, as “living bodies” that contain the sum of all knowledge and are capable of being explored and permuted infinitely, and revere them as being filled with endless meaning and sustenance. Both Jews and Hindus see the texts as transcending the literal meanings of the words where human interpretation begins and the eternal ends. Both *Veda* and Torah refer to the specific ancient texts and to the interpretations of the text and to the way of life.

Hindus use the word Vedic or Vedic knowledge like Jews use the word Torah; it references an entire religion and way of life.^[3]

Both religions treat words as a manifestation of the totality of reality, as a source of knowledge, as divine language, and as a text. The traditions consider the texts as essential, primary components of the cosmos and reality itself. For Jews, God looked into the Torah to create the world.

Both Judaism and Hinduism treat the actual words in their respective primary texts (written and oral) as preexisting from eternity and having powers. In both Hebrew and Vedic scriptures, the world is created through the power of the divine word—a powerful word whose existence predates the world and has within it powers for creation. Judaism has traditions of divine names with powers to create and bless, including forty-two and seventy-two letter names. Naomi Janowitz in her work on divine names in early Jewish mysticism shows how the divine names are iconographic, participating in the divine object that it represents.^[4]

Both Vedic and rabbinic traditions stress the orality of the word, though currently the Vedic version still stresses auditory recitation. Its rabbinic counterpart, however, has predominately separated out the auditory cantillation and recitation of synagogue from the Talmudic secondary orality of texts subject to transmission, debate, and argument. Yet, there are still groups of traditional Jews that encourage the recitation of rabbinic texts without understanding.

Judaism and Hinduism share a sense of tradition that guides the religious on reading the sacred text rightly. For Hindus, the seer (*risi*) receives the eternal knowledge and hands down the tradition. When one studies under a teacher of the eternal Hindu wisdom, it is because he is the one who has the tradition and is one who is a part of it.

Rabbis have a similar sense of an oral tradition of the Torah that was handed down, which later needed to be committed to writing. However, in Judaism, this eternal knowledge is believed to have been given to a single group (the Jewish people), at a single point in time (Sinai), and as part of the unfolding of a historic progression. The oral law of the Torah needed to be written down as the Mishnah and the Midrash.

Judaism regards the Hebrew of the Torah as a sacred language, as divine names, the medium of divine communication, and the building blocks

of creation. In the Midrash, the Hebrew letters are seen as existing independently in a transcendent realm. The Midrash teaches that when Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, he saw God designing crowns for the individual letters (Menachot 29b). The Midrash also claims that the artisan Bezalel built the Tabernacle in the wilderness because he “knew how to combine the letters with which heaven and earth were created” (Berachot 55a). For the medieval sages, the Jewish prayers are sacred precisely because their words are composed of Hebrew letters.

A millennium ago, the Jewish thinker Saadyah Gaon observed the crucial difference between *Veda* and Torah; he points out that while Judaism assumes divine prophecy, the Brahmin philosophers from India assume that the truths were eternally available to anyone who attains the level of seer (*risi*) without divine prophecy.

Mantra

Many Vedic verses are treated as mantras, meaning a sacred utterance, numinous sound, or a syllable, word, phoneme, or group of words considered to have spiritual power. Mantras are structured formulae of thoughts, as well as religious thought, prayer, sacred utterance, but they also are believed to be a spell or weapon of supernatural power. Mantras are ancient; they flourished during the middle Vedic period (between 1000 BCE to 500 BCE; this is the same era that saw King David and the prophet Ezra), meaning that they originated at the same time as the birth of Judaism.

Jan Gonda, an important scholar of Hinduism, defines *mantra* as the general name for the verses, formulas, or sequence of words that contain praises that have religious, magical, or spiritual efficiency, which are meditated upon, recited, muttered, or sung in a ritual, and which are collected in the methodically arranged ancient texts of Hinduism. Almost any Hindu ritual act, act of devotion, or meditation requires a mantra. Sometimes, it is a later formulation and other times it is an auspicious sequence of Vedic verses, other times it can be hymns and musical chants.

Harvey Alper, professor of religious studies at Southern Methodist University, suggested that numerous mantras have philosophical themes, moral principles, make calls to a virtuous life, and even mundane petitions. A mantra, according to Alper, creates a feeling in the practicing person, has

an emotive numinous effect, and defies expression. One function of mantras is to solemnize and ratify rituals. In later periods, mantras were recited with the intention of a transcendental redemptive goal, like an escape from the cycle of life and rebirth, for merit, or the experience of a spiritual connection with the god.

Hindu mantras may be spoken aloud, *anirukta* (not enunciated), *upamsu* (inaudible), or *manasa* (not spoken, but recited in the mind). Often, mantras are used in ritual as silent instruments of meditation. *Kirtan* is the meditative chanting of Sanskrit mantras as devotion, often with musical accompaniment.

The mantra corresponds several Jewish categories including biblical prayers and psalms, rabbinic prayers and blessings, the use of biblical verses for their magical power, and the traditions of Hebrew divine names.

Om

At its simplest, the word Om, or Aum, serves as the basic, most fundamental source of all mantras. Before existence and beyond existence, there is only one reality, *Brahman*, and the first manifestation of *Brahman* is expressed as Om. The *Katha Upanishad* states: “The one syllable [aum] is indeed *Brahman*. This one syllable is the highest. Whosoever knows this one syllable obtains all that he desires” (1.2.16). The *Bhagavad Gita* (8.13) states: “Uttering the monosyllable Aum, the eternal word of *Brahman*, one who departs leaving the body (at death), he attains the Supreme Goal.” Aum is also the boundary of all the phonetic sounds in Sanskrit as they are alphabetized from a short “a” sound in the throat, ending with the closing of the lips “m.”^[5]

Because Om is considered to be foundational, it is included at the beginning and end of all Hindu prayers; these placements serve as sacred incantations to be intoned at the beginning and end of any reading or prayer.

Japa

English speakers often confuse the words *mantra* and *japa*. Mantras are sacred words and most Hindus know them as a chant or blessing said during a ritual. *Japa*, on the other hand, is a meditation practice of repeating those mantras. *Mantra japa* is the name for a practice of repeating (*japa*) a mantra as a meditation practice. Devotees often use *malas* (bead necklaces) containing 108 beads when chanting, counting a bead after each mantra. Mantras are repeated an auspicious number of times; the most popular number is 108, but it can be repeated as five times, 1,008 times or even ten times that.

Below are the following three most popular Hindu mantras:

The Gayatri mantra is one of the most universal of all Hindu mantras, invoking the universal *Brahman* as the principle of knowledge and the illumination of the primordial Sun. The mantra is from the *Rg Veda III: 62: 10*. “Let us meditate on that excellent glory of the divine Light (Vivifier, Sun). May he stimulate our understandings (knowledge, intellectual illumination).” Or closer to the original “OM. May we meditate upon the effulgence of the Supreme Reality who is worthy of worship and who pervades the earth, the sky, and the heavens. May that Supreme Reality guide our understanding. OM.”

The Pavamana mantra (*pavamana* means being purified) introduced in the *Bṛhadaranyaka Upaniṣad* (1.3.28.) was originally meant to be recited during the introductory praise of the *Soma* sacrifice by the patron sponsoring the sacrifice. Now it is a universal message in which the one praying asks, “From the unreal lead me to the real, from the dark lead me to the light, from death lead me to immortality.”

The Shanti mantra is a valediction at the end of several Upanishad chapters. It is widely used to seeking calm and peace of mind, as a benediction for a new project, and as an interjection in conversation.

“Om! Let the Studies that we together undertake be effulgent; let there be no Animosity amongst us; Om! Peace, Peace, Peace.”
(Taittiriya Upanishad 2.2.2) The repetition of the word peace three times stands for peace in the divine, physical and internal realms.

Language within Judaism

Within Judaism, the divine name, the four-letter tetragrammaton, has powers and effects to the one who pronounces it. Based on the four letter-name, Judaism has rich documented traditions of many other divine names (including names with 12, 42, 72 letters) that date back to antiquity. However, in Judaism, there has been a ban on pronouncing or chanting the name since the destruction of the Temple.

Language philosophy in medieval India was dominated by the dispute between the naturalists of the *Mimamsa* school, who held that verbal utterance was the sound that designates the actual phonetic utterance, and the metaphysical traditions who saw a mystical indivisible word-whole between sound and meaning. This divide roughly corresponds to the medieval debate of Maimonides and Nahmanides; Maimonides considered language as natural, while Nahmanides assumes that the Hebrew language has mystical qualities.

Maimonides (d. 1204) reasoned that the preference for the Hebrew language is based upon its natural characteristics: “A reason for calling our language the holy language [. . .] is because it has no special name for the organ of generation in females or in males, nor for the act of generation itself . . . , nor for semen, nor for secretion and feces.” Rather, Hebrew “only describes them in figurative language and by way of hints” (*Guide for the Perplexed*, III:8). Maimonides would not appreciate Sanskrit, which according to the Monier-Williams Dictionary, has two hundred words for sex and fifty for coitus.

By contrast, Nahmanides (Moses ben Nahman, d. 1290) believed that “the reason for the Rabbis calling the language of the Torah the holy tongue is that the words of the Torah [. . .] were spoken in that language; it is the language that the Holy One, blessed be He, speaks with His prophets and with His people[.]” He further adds a mystical element: “it is the language by which He is called in his sacred names [. . .] and in which He created His

universe [. . .] and giving his angels and his host names in that language” (Nahmanides commentary on Exodus, 30:13).

Nahmanides’s approach is reflected in those Jewish traditions that teach that the correct permutation and pronunciation of certain divine names grants the ability to cure the dangerously ill, perceive events far away in time and space, and even to create a golem.

One of the few Jewish teachers who ignored this taboo of pronouncing the divine name and created mediation techniques around the repetition of the divine name was Abraham Abulafia (Spain-Italy c. 1240–1292). He developed a meditative system based on the Hebrew alphabet and divine names. Abulafia taught yoga-like exercises that involved altered modes of breathing, rotating the head, and pronouncing the divine name with a sequence of vowels.^[6]

Sefer Yetzirah

The *Sefer Yetzirah* or *Book of Formation* (estimates of date of composition vary from 200 BCE to 800 CE, usually assumed to be second to fourth centuries CE) extolled the Hebrew alphabet as the manifestation of celestial patterns of energy. “Twenty-two foundation letters: He engraved them, He carved them, He combined them, He weighed them, He transformed them. And with them depicted the soul of all that was formed and all that will be formed in the future. . . . They are engraved with voice, carved with breath.” (2:2–3)^[7]

The *Sefer Yetzirah* probably has Indo-Hindu roots based on its sophisticated grammar, a science that Judaism lacks. In an article, David Shulman, professor of Indian studies at Hebrew University, sees a definitive Indian connection to *Sefer Yetzirah*. Shulman claims that highly developed phonology, etymology, morphology, syntax, metrics, and grammar are one of the greatest achievements of ancient India by fifth century BCE. Hence, Shulman thinks the teaching of the five basic points of articulation in the oral cavity and the ordering of the phenomes as clearly based on a Sanskrit

achievement of an operative phonemic system in *Sefer Yetzirah* 2.3. He also notes that the content of *Sefer Yetzirah* 2.1 in which the process of articulation begins before the production of audible sounds is a Sanskrit achievement.

Shulman finds it even more striking that the letter “Alef” as a principle of unity is paralleled in Indian texts that similarly claim that “a” is the primal sound inherent in all the other phonemes. Identifying “a” with the deity is also in Tamil works, which associates the unvoiced aspiration with Bhairava, a form of Shiva, the self-created un-manifest breath of life that pervades the whole of reality. Shulman also notes that God’s inner reflection causes cosmos to vibrate with linguistic energies in the Saiva systems.

Professor Yehudah Liebes at the Hebrew University conjectured in an article that a Northern Mesopotamia region was the conduit for this Hindu influence, while Shulman is ready to acknowledge that there were Indian teachings taught in Hellenistic Alexandria.

Both Hinduism and Judaism have teachings on the shape of the letters. Curiously, Sanskrit and Hebrew are the only two languages in the world in which the visual characters of their alphabet correspond very precisely to their individual audible sounds, a fact discovered by Swiss physicist Hans Jenny (1904–1972) through his invention of the oscilloscope, a curiosity open to diverse interpretations.

SACRIFICE

When one of my Jewish acquaintances asked if the original sacrifices of the Vedas are still practiced, particularly those of horses to ensure a kingdom’s earthly success, I answered, quite plainly, that no Hindu has thought like that for over two thousand years. In many ways, it is like asking if Jews still perform sacrifices to seal political treaties or to acknowledge succession as in Genesis or asking if Jews still offer sacrifice on Yom Kippur instead of engaging in repentance. The answer is that these deeply historic religions have modernized. One of my explicit goals in my encounter was to look at Hindu ritual that seemingly corresponded to Jewish ritual. Both faiths have Bronze and Iron Age scriptures concerning sacrifice. Many Banares Hindus that I have met have assumed that Jews still perform Levitical sacrifices and in a similar manner, most Jews assume that contemporary Hindus still follow

the Vedic practices and gods. Vedic religion is contemporary with the cultic religions of the Ancient Near East—Hittite, Assyrian or Rameses's Egypt.

Sacrifice as Structure

While the performance of Vedic sacrifice, with its complex details, does not reflect contemporary Hindu practice, the texts still serve as a symbol of unchallenged authority and tradition and as a scriptural basis for later Hinduism.^[8]

Vedic texts record the perspective of the priests and warrior-kings who believed the sacrifices brought the ruler favor, prosperity, and maintained the cosmos. The original Bronze Age Vedic sacrifice was a kingly ritual for power that culminated in a restoration of kingship.

In later eras, Vedic sacrifice virtually exclusively stressed the offering in the fire, in which the purpose of sacrifice focused on the individual sacrifice. The ritual turns to the individual as self-sacrificer, who realizes the attainment of the immortal Self through the internalized knowledge of the ritual. At this point, the sacrifice is no longer about maintaining the cosmos, but is now about the discovery, perfection, and immortality of the soul as well as accruing merit for the afterlife.

In many ways, it is similar to the Talmudic shift from sin offerings to an internal focus on repentance. The Talmud stated that “without the Temple, a person's table atones” (*Menachot* 97a). The ancient Upanishads stated much earlier that study and discipline are more effective than sacrifice. The attainment of knowledge through study rather than through offering sacrifice is analogous to the comparison between real and unreal, darkness and light, and death and immortality (BrUp 1-3-28). Later Hinduism teaches that offerings are not to gods since they do not eat, but rather they are a means by which we make our lives and tables sacred.

In *Rig Veda* 10.90, sacrifice shows the unity of all existence, the performance of ritual is indispensable in the process of creation, and the rite is an agent in the world. The Supreme Being, called Purusha (the cosmic man or a man who contains the whole universe within him), reached out and enveloped the world on every side. From that engulfment came the horses, the cattle, goats, and sheep. The earth evolved out of Purusha's feet, and

the directions north, south, east, and west from his ears. The divine itself, Purusha, was sacrificed in a fire to create the ordered world. Those same sacrificial processes became the primary laws guiding humanity. In the later Hindu tradition, the *atman* (soul) sacrifices the whole man as a microcosm of the universe (Kaus UP).

The Vedic literature, as taught in many Western introductory works, emphasizes an elaborate horse sacrifice called the *Ashvamedha* that involved the sacrifice of many animals and even bestiality to create a victorious kingdom. However, modern Hindu readers read this as ethical allegory filled with symbolism. Twentieth-century commentaries, such as that of modernist Swami Dayananda Saraswati, rejected the literal meaning of the Vedas as carnal corruptions as opposed to the true spiritual meaning of the Vedas. He arrives at an entirely symbolic interpretation of the ritual in which no horse was actually to be slaughtered in the ritual.

Animal sacrifice of the Vedas has not been practiced for almost two millennia. In fact, killing animals in the ancient Vedas sharply contrasts later vegetarian Brahmin Hinduism. Nevertheless, these animal sacrifices are sometimes still conducted during special performances of the original Vedic rituals in archaic Brahmin enclaves in South India that seek to preserve the ancient tradition, but they are not part of regular piety. A possible (imagined) parallel to this would be if a group in the modern state of Israel were to perform the Leviticus sacrifices from the Torah as a demonstration for an interested audience.

For example, there is one Vedic sacrifice ritual still performed by a secluded group of priests in the South; leading Indologist Fritz Staal and other Western academic scholars paid this group to perform and film the full ancient ritual. In the two-week sacrifice process, they build a temporary shelter for the ritual, then construct a stone image of a huge falcon from consecrated bricks. This bird symbolizes Universal Being. A sacrifice of fourteen goats forms a central part of the early ritual. It involves reciters, chanters, performers, and priests. Seventeen specialized priests are required for this most elaborate of Vedic rituals. Staal shows how expensive and complex the ancient rituals were. This ritual is a cosmogonic ritual, in which the cosmic “Man” is ritually sacrificed to re-create the universe yearly.

Today

In general, the act of animal sacrifice was banned in most of Northern India in the 1950s, it has continued in several regions of India—most notably in the worship of Kali. The worshippers of Kali tend to limit this sacrifice to individual offerings once a year during Durga Puja.

On the other hand, throughout Nepal, animal sacrifice is widely accepted and practiced. It consists of small offerings to insure success and atone for misdeeds, as well as large sacrifice festivals where hundreds of thousand animals are sacrificed in a single day. A friend of mine said his Yeshiva-age son was mesmerized by watching the killing process as a way to relate to the biblical and Talmudic sacrificial precepts, despite the differences in rules.

I had a similar experience at a UNESCO world heritage site in Nepal; the site was a paved area of intricately carved temples and shrines, which preserved a distant historical dynasty that has long become officially defunct in religious practice. Sacrifice and offerings are officially banned at the site. Street hustlers or touts, continuously accosted tourists, I turned away from this scene in disappointment and ventured down a side street, a small alley with open-air market stalls.

About a block down this alley, I smelled a horrific smell that I sensed was coming from a pathway between two buildings leading to a backyard. I proceeded to enter and reached an enclosed area to find several men dressed in their finest Nepalese suits and Dhaka hats watching a worker searing a whole goat with a blowtorch. They invited me to sit down on a small wall of cinder blocks and join them. As I watched the goat's hair burning off and the meat begin to cook, it slowly dawned on me that I was watching the cooking of an offering that was just made serendipitously at one of the shrines. As I was inevitably about to be asked to join in consuming the sacrificial animal once it was roasted, I politely excused myself, saying that I had someone waiting for me.

In Nepal, there are still regular voluntary offerings of animal sacrifices. The Nepalese people have a month-long festival every five years where up to 250,000 animals, mainly water buffalo, are killed in honor of the goddess of power, Gadhimai, a local variant on the goddess Kali. (The meat is

eventually sold to meat processing companies.)

Comparison

Currently, academic scholars compare the ancient rules of Leviticus and the Vedas on the basis that both ritual systems are governed by grammars analogous to those of natural languages. In fact, more than one university professor has been bringing students familiar with Jewish sources to India to observe the sacrifices as a means of understanding the original Jewish ritual.

To offer some legal comparisons, in Hindu sacrifice, the animal is killed by a direct single motion chop. This contrasts with Jewish Temple sacrifice and kosher meat slaughtering, in which the animal is killed in a continuous motion of an across swipe of the knife. The Hindu method would be unacceptable in Jewish law because it applies pressure and not cutting. The Jewish method would be unacceptable because it uses cutting and not pressure. However, both lay out formal rules for slaughtering the animal.

In both Rabbinic ritual and Hindu sacrifice, there is a clear process for choosing the designated animal at the exclusion of others and to make sure that it does not have a blemish. In Hinduism, this animal is then associated with the deity, in which the pieces of the animal are designated and have separate consecrations.

In the Talmudic presentation of ancient Jewish sacrifice, there are four stages of slaughter: the slaughter itself (*shekiyah*), the receiving of the blood (*kabbalah*), the carrying of the blood to the alter (*holakah*), and the sprinkling of the blood (*zerikah*). Ancient Vedic texts describe specific placement and carrying processes for the burning.

Brahmin Hinduism does not have a concept of slaughter of meat for ordinary people (*Hullin*), for Jews the limiting of meat eating to the temple is only the rejected minority opinion of Rabbi Yishmael (*Hullin* 16b).

In many respects, Hindu law combines the Jewish concepts of purity and holiness into a single category. If eating meat is not pure, then there cannot be a holy way of doing it. In Jewish Temple ritual, every sacrifice required sanctification (*hakdashah*) and was to be brought into the court of the sanctuary. In sharp contrast, sacrifice to Kali can be done in more private or informal settings, such as in the yard or at home.

Post-Vedic offerings to contemporary Hindu sacrifice centers entirely

on the slaughter. They let the blood spill out or even drink it or bath in it. The inner organs of the animals are offered upon the altar without a presentation. In Judaism, blood is never consumed or drunken. In contrast, in Hinduism, those that offer animal sacrifice believe drinking blood gives spiritual powers and energy.

Substitution

Even though the categories of Leviticus shapes the world of the Bible and the Talmud, Jews do not offer sacrifices anymore, even for display. Rather, they have transformed actual sacrifice into a metaphor for prayer, home table, and synagogue. Daily Jewish prayer takes the place of sacrifices; the table is an altar and the synagogue is a small temple.

Hindus also use the symbol of animal sacrifice for temple service and home ritual. However, Hindus kept the practice of a sacred fire without the animal (see below on *Homa*) and maintained the practice of agricultural offerings such as fruit and flowers—though they omit most of the specific Vedic details.^{[\[9\]](#)}

Some Hindu communities, particularly in the southern regions of India, preserve a remembrance of the physical practice and “slaughter” a whole coconut by cracking its head. For example, lay persons make a voluntary sacrifice of coconuts at Tirupati. In other nearby temple complexes, it is the task of the officiating priest (*pujari*), not the layperson, to officially crack the coconut with the single smash against a metal rod in the same rapid succession, the way goats are killed. The coconut water plays the role of blood ritually spilled out, leaving the coconut flesh to be eaten by the one who made the offering. The smashing is currently interpreted spiritually as a smashing of the ego.

Hindus have a sense that the fruit and flowers are substitutes for animals while post-Talmudic Jews believe that only prayer is a substitute. Jews still have a continuous light (*ner tamid*) in synagogue but no sacred fire offering.

However, sacrifice as a lay devotion allows for wider latitude. Many Jews place their sins on a chicken on Yom Kippur eve and then slaughter the chicken in a practice called *kapparot* or some Iranian Jews would even slaughter an animal. Some medieval and modern rabbis condemned it as an offering of a sacrifice outside the temple, and thus forbade it.

Later Hindu traditions treat eating, drinking, and rejoicing as replacements for sacrificial worship (Chandogya Up 3.17.1–5; 3.18–23). These traditions are similar to the Jewish practice of eating meat and drinking wine on festivals that used to have sacrifices.

Hindus replace performing the Vedic sacrifices with reading and studying the rules governing them, much like the Talmud sees the study of sacrificial law as a replacement for its performance. Orthodox Jewish liturgy starts each morning prayer service by reciting the sacrifices formerly done, and has an addition to the service (*mussaf*) about sacrifice recited on days of festival sacrifices.

Is Religion about Sacrifice?

In the Torah, the prophet Isaiah said: “To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? Said the Lord: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats” (1:11). In a comparable manner, early Buddhists, Jains, and some Upanishads criticized the animal sacrifices made in Brahmin temples.

Hindus—like Jews—see the criticism of sacrifice as only applying to corrupt forms and not as a critique of the very concept of ritual and sacrifice.

Hinduism does not accept treating ritual law as an allegory, the same way Jews reject such allegory even though Buddhists, Jains, and Christians reject that the law is binding so they can interpret sacrifice metaphorically.

Swami Prabhupada of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) presents a traditional Hindu understanding: “Although animal killing in a sacrifice is recommended in the Vedic literature, the animal is not considered to be killed [. . .] the animal is given a new animal life after being killed in the sacrifice, and sometimes the animal

is promoted immediately to the human form of life.”^[10] Today, modern believers explain the performance of sacrifices as benefitting the performer directly by addressing human emotions like fear, stress, confidence, and happiness.

Cosmos

For both the Torah and the *Rig Veda*, sacrifice is about the creation and maintaining the cosmos or universe. Biblical scholars, both academic and traditional, see a literary connection between the creation of the world in Genesis and the building of the Tabernacle in Exodus. This common Jewish and Hindu idea of sacrifice serving to maintain cosmos is unlike the Christian idea of sacrifice that always involves death and killing of the savior remembered in liturgy. For maintaining the cosmos, sacrifice can include flour, vegetable and liquid offerings—items that are not killed.

Already in the first century, Josephus compares the Temple and the cosmos (Jewish Wars 184–237). In Midrash, the Tabernacle preceded the creation of the world. “The Temple, as it is written: “A glorious throne exalted from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary” (Jeremiah 17:12) (Pesachim 54a; Genesis Rabbah 1: 4).

Like the Vedas, rabbinic Midrash has the world created from a cosmic man at the site of the altar. Rabbi Yuda ben Pazi said: “The Holy One, blessed be He, took a ladleful [of dust] from the place of the altar, and created the first man from it. He said: Would that he be created from the place of the altar and be able to endure! This is what is written: ‘And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground’ (Gen. 2:7). And it is written: ‘An altar of earth you shall make to me’ (Exod. 20:21). Just as ‘earth’ below [refers to] the altar, so too here [it refers to] the altar” (JT Nazir 6:2). In both, there is an ordered world with the microcosm of man reflecting the Temple and the world.

The rabbinic texts do not associate primordial man with the divine. However, in Zoharic Kabbalah as developed by Isaac Luria (sixteenth century), there is a primordial man (*Adam Kadmon*) as the prototype and nexus of the infinite and the cosmos.

UPANISHADS

Western media presents a stereotypical image of the holy man on the mountain—an aged guru who offers the meaning of life to the young novice; this image is rooted in the *Upanishad* that requires the believer to find a teacher who shows them how to find the Absolute by looking into their own soul. In Hinduism, one sits at the feet of a master to receive the hidden wisdom. Hold onto this image to understand the philosophic traditions of Hinduism. [\[11\]](#)

Collection of Texts

The Upanishads are a collection of texts that contains some of the central philosophical concepts of Hinduism, ultimate reality, the soul, and liberation. Upanishad translates to “sitting at the foot/feet of,” referring to the student sitting down near the teacher while receiving esoteric knowledge. Older parts of the *Upanishad* text dates back to the Second Temple era of Ezra and the return of the Jewish exile (500 BCE), the latest are contemporary with the Mishnah (200 CE).

In Judaism, the standard image for knowledge is the Talmudic study hall to seek the meaning of a text. Judaism sees the text as being open to alternative possibilities for creating new interpretations, such as the seventy faces of Torah. The rabbi is the wise teacher who knows enough to guide the student through rabbinic discourse. (Buddhism contrasts with both Hinduism and Judaism, since its standard image is of rows of adepts meditating under a master.)

Both Hinduism and Judaism focus on knowledge to attain truth. In Hinduism, the mastery comes through the teachings of a guru or the realization of a divine truth under the guru’s mentorship, and can happen with or without texts. In Judaism, the mastery of knowledge comes from debating interpretation of texts.

More than two hundred Upanishads are known, of which the first dozen or so are the oldest and the most important. They are called the principal or main (*mukhya*) Upanishads and they were memorized by each generation and passed down verbally for centuries.

The collected texts are referred to as *Vedanta*, variously interpreted to mean either the “last chapters, parts of the *Veda*” or “the object, the highest

purpose of the *Veda*.” *Vedanta* is the name of the philosophic schools based on the Upanishads.

The Teacher/Guru

The Upanishads teaches that the guru or the guidance of a teacher is so important that a student “should go with sacrificial twigs in hand to a teacher who knows the Vedas and who is established in Brahmin” (*Mundaka UP* 1:2:12).

While at Banaras Hindu University, I taught an Introduction to the Study of Religion course. The first reading I assigned was William James’s classic work *Varieties of Religious Experience*. In the book, James describes religion as personal and individual, typified by mysticism—which he presented a fleeting experience best felt alone in one’s quiet moments. My class universally rejected this Protestant idea, vociferously arguing that one needs a teacher, a guru, a path, and training to attain these experiences. Additionally, they argued that one needs the setting of an ashram to cultivate the correct practice. Even experiencing the absolute reality requires critique and guidance from others on the path.

According to medieval *Vedanta* teacher Shankara, anyone seeking to attain realization requires the guidance of a teacher, who generates knowledge in the disciple through exegesis and skillful handling of words. However, book knowledge of Vedic scripture alone cannot offer realization; the Guru must have realized the oneness of *Brahman* in everything.

Rabbinic texts state that one should “make a teacher for oneself” (*Avot* 1:6). The Talmud includes stories about how to relate to a teacher; one story advocates learning from one’s teacher how to tie one’s shoes and another story recounts a student who even snuck under his teacher’s bed to learn from his every action. Maimonides thinks that for a more advanced work like his *Guide of the Perplexed*, a student is to find the teacher who will use allusions to teach the higher truth. Hasidism is filled with such stories about finding a teacher. In the Jewish tradition, ordination originally required direct laying of the hands of someone who had a direct lineage of teaching to Moses.

Brahman

The idea that there is a unity of being, a single Absolute Divine *Brahman* goes back to the Upanishads and subsequently codified in the *Brahma Sutra* (circa 450 CE). The Upanishads equated the earlier Vedic gods to the supreme, immortal, and incorporeal Absolute Divine *Brahman* of the Upanishads.

Depending on the Upanishad, they present *Brahman* as an unknown ultimate reality, a personal god to worship, and the many forms of divinity in our world. There are passages that can point to theism, a monism, a Neo-Platonism type emanation, immanence, and many other forms of the divine. Later generations had no great need to preclude possibilities, even if they choose one over another. Hinduism, as based on the Upanishads, accepts one divine reality behind everything. Beyond this, Hinduism leaves the various options open, allowing for a multiplicity of approaches that are each in a dialectic with one another.

In a similar manner, the Talmud has many passages that present diverse opinions on a ritual topic. While sometimes there is an explicit conclusion given as a final answer, most of the time, the commentators—rather than the Talmud—determine the definitive opinion. The Talmud has an ethos of preserving multiple legal opinions that reflect its sense that both opinions are valid “these and those are the words of the living God” (Eiruvim 13b). Today, to resolve this diversity, Jews will reproduce a textual casuistry from the Talmud to the commentaries and codes, and from there, the contemporary majority and minority opinions.

Catholics accustomed to a fixed doctrinal opinion are frequently frustrated by this Talmudic approach, thinking it is too free-wheeling; however, Talmudic dialectic does not have an anything goes ethos, rather it is quite legal and reaches conclusions—but conclusions rooted in a weave of interpretation.

In a similar manner, there is a Jewish desire for an explicit conclusion of monotheism from Hindus, when Hindus see no need for closure, leaving the conception of divinity open-ended for interpretations the way Jews leave Talmudic opinions open to interpretations. All Upanishads accept one ultimate reality, but some Upanishads are more monistic, while others less

so, and the non-dualistic *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* grounds the *Vedanta* school.

These texts produce a core of Hinduism that tends to be discussions about God and metaphysics. The major study on the way to realization is the divine and the nature of the absolute, as if Jews were to spend all their time on the diverse views of the divine in Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*, Gersonides, Cordovero, and Lurianic Kabbalah, and then Hayyim of Volozhin's *Nefesh Hahayyim* and Hasidut, concluding with Kook and Heschel.

Ultimate Reality

Among the many statements about the ultimate reality in the Upanishads, I will focus on four useful for my Jewish reader.

Ultimate Reality Model #1: Unmanifest and Manifest

The first major distinction in the discussion of the Ultimate is between the Absolute as without qualities (*nirguna*) as opposed to with qualities (*saguna*) (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad—2, III.6). The unmanifested is the Absolute, the pure and formless ground of being from which creation and manifestation arise. As such, the unmanifested is free from change and above explanation or comprehension in terms of any manifest reality. In contrast, the manifest qualities and attributes are able to be represented in images and forms of manifest material reality. “From the unmanifested (unreal *asat*) the world of names and forms (the real-*sat*) is said to arise” (Taittiriya Up II.7.1). The Hindu terms are *saguna* and *nirguna* with and without attributes.

The Hebrew University professor of Indian religions David Shulman puts forward the hypothesis that Jews worship a *saguna* God of attributes with no visible form, while Hindus worship a formless *nirguna* God, who can take

on many forms. If things are seen in this light, then the two faiths no longer can be placed in simple dichotomies. Most forms of Judaism do not worship God as a form, but in some higher sense. Jewish approaches to God still have form in that they refer to biblical images implicated in form. Many Hindus do not worship the formless divine, but similar to Jews they worship the divine in a specific form of a personal God *Ishvara*.

Absolute Model #2: “Neither This, Nor That”

Most of the great teachings of later Hindu philosophy, especially *Advaita*, derive from the great doctrine of “neti-neti” of “not this—not that,” or “neither this, nor that.” It helps articulate the nature of *Brahman* by first understanding what is not *Brahman*. It corresponds to the Western notion of *via negativa*, a mystical approach that forms a part of the tradition of apophatic theology. Whatever positive conception that you can say or imagine cannot be the infinite *Brahman*. At its core, Maimonides accepts similar views of negative theology. The ultimate reality is beyond language or human conception so that any words we use are only a way of negating what the divine is not.

God Model #3: How many Gods?

The Upanishads teach that while ultimate reality is a single supreme soul, *Brahman*, there are thirty-three *devas* corresponding to the forces, both natural and gods (*deva*), which are mentioned in the Vedas. The count ascended to millions in an attempt to express poetically the infinitude of the universe, in order to capture the all-pervading reality. This is how 330 million

gods made sense as a sense of the divine as all pervading. No one actually took this as a literal fact of millions of gods, it was rather always taken as a poetic narrative. Here is a text that starts with the thirty-three *devas* in the Vedas and narrows it down in the following way:

Then Vidaghdha, the son of Sakala, asked him: “How many gods are there, Yajnavalkya?” “How many gods are there, Yajnavalkya?”

“Thirty-three.”

“Very good,” said Sakalya and asked again: “How many gods are there?”

“Six.”

“Very good,” said Sakalya and asked again: “How many gods are there?”

“Three.”

“Very good,” said Sakalya and asked again: “How many gods are there?”

“Two.”

“Very good,” said Sakalya and asked again: “How many gods are there?”

“One and a half.”

“Very good,” said Sakalya and asked again: “How many gods are there?”

“One.” “Very good.” Brihadaranyaka Upanishad—3, IX).

God Model #4: Theism and Immanence

The Upanishads also present a biblically theistic divine, familiar to Western theology, that affirms God as first cause, providential ruler, and lord over all things, who is also immanent in all beings.

Him who is the supreme Mighty Lord of lords, The supreme Divinity of divinities . . . He is the one God, hidden in all beings, all pervading, the self within all beings, watching over all works, dwelling in all beings, the witness, the perceiver, the only one, free from qualities. The wise who perceive Him dwelling within their self, to them belongs eternal happiness and serenity, not to others . . . He who knows this God as primal cause, through reason and Yoga (self-discipline), achieves liberation. (Shvetashvatara Upanishad 6.7–6.13).

In the *Isha Upanishad*, Isha, means God or the Lord, from the root that means to own and to rule, it implies that all things belong and are ruled by God. In this Upanishad, the world is for the sake of God to live in. God is not some alien owner or ruler who dominates from a distance, but the divine presence that is immediate and in everything, or all-encompassing; this includes our bodies and our minds. Our various personal egoistical claims obscure that divine presence.

All this entire universe belongs to God: who lives in it, in every smallest bit of it. Thus giving up all things to God, whatever changes in this changing universe may be enjoyed: untainted by possessiveness, uncompromised by wanting it. Whatever there may be to claim, to whom, in truth, does it belong? (6.22)

The Self

The Upanishads offer the secret of the self. The self identifies with the Absolute Being, in which, every discussion of the self is at the same time a discussion of *Brahman*.

In contrast, Judaism tends to sense an abyss between the limited self and the infinite divine. Jewish texts may have that attempt to overcome some of the distance—God is as close as one’s own heart, immanent in the world, or that humans have a divine soul within them—but God generally remains beyond any complete identification with the soul.

The *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* relates that Yajnavalkya makes clear to his questioners, who ask him to reveal that “the *Brahman* that is manifest, not hidden, that is the self within everything,” that “it is yourself that is

within everything.” This self “goes beyond hunger and thirst, grief, delusion, old age and death” (III 4 2). Our desires obscure this self. Humans have the goal of liberation from worldly suffering and limitations.

Despite the primary focus on the individual’s personal liberation, the Upanishads also suggest going beyond the individual self to show concern for others’ welfare. In the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* we find that “[w]hen one gives shelter to human beings, when one gives them food, one becomes a world for human beings. When one finds grass and water for animals, one becomes a world for animals.” One also has a greater ethical goal: “As one desires safety for one’s own world, all beings desire safety for the one who knows this” (I 4, 10). This realization imbues one with a sympathy for the entire creation.

Upanishad Meditation

During the 1960s, when Indian meditation was first becoming popular in the United States, the musical group, The Moody Blues, sang, “Thinking is the best way to travel.” The *Chandogya Upanishad* (VI) explains meditation (*dhyana*), as a state higher than ordinary thought. This passage ascribes meditation to all of reality: “The earth meditates, as it were. The atmosphere meditates, as it were. The heaven meditates, as it were. Water meditates, as it were. Mountains meditate, as it were. Gods and men meditate, as it were.” Interestingly, the text has the same phrase as the Talmud for describing an anthropomorphism: “as it were.”

Meditation is about attaining a focused and clear mind, like “the still and clear bucket of water reflects the sun.” According to Shankara on *Mundaka Upanishad*, “the favorableness of the intellect comes about when it continues to be transparent and tranquil on having been made clean like a mirror, water, etc. by the removal of pollution caused by the dirt of attachment, springing from the contact of the sense and the sense-object.” Meditation produces four qualities: it helps one distinguish the eternal from the non-eternal, it allows the dispassionate enjoyment of the fruit of this world and next, it serves as a perfection of mind and senses, and it is helpful in hankering for liberation. [\[12\]](#)

In Judaism, for example in the Psalms, while the mountains and earth

praise God, they do not meditate. Elsewhere in Psalms, as well as the Talmud, one should be speaking of God's Torah day and night. In addition, in various forms of Kabbalah and Hasidut should one be constantly thinking about God, for example, the Baal Shem Tov said: "Man is where his mind is" (*Ben Porath Yoseph* 56d–57a).

Western Views

Nineteenth-century scholars treated the Upanishads as the Hindu scripture that paralleled the Protestant view of the Bible as scripture. Subsequently, many Westerners confuse the Upanishads with all of Hinduism and thereby label Hinduism as mysticism, as monism, or as merely a transcendental philosophy. For these Westerners, the book answered "the problems of the origin, the nature, and the destiny of man and of the universe" by producing "sublime conceptions and with intuitions of universal truth." They distinguished the Upanishads from the "empty ceremonialism" and "polytheistic belief" of Hinduism and instead, it offered an Aryan "all-comprehending unitary Reality."^[13]

Most notably, in the nineteenth-century transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson's version of Upanishadic wisdom presents a unity of God, soul, and universe in a new consciousness, which restores the bond between the self and the Eternal Self. For him, the highest object of Hindu religion is to restore that bond between self (*atman*) and the Eternal Self, that is, Over-Soul.

The important twentieth-century philosophers of religion, including Frederick Copleston, Rudolf Otto, R. C. Zaehner, and W. T. Stace all treated the monism of the Upanishad as their essence of Hinduism and used it to discuss the entire religion; for all of them Hinduism, is a monism consisting of the soul realizing its identity with the Absolute. However, the overwhelming majority of Hindus are Shaivite and Vaishnava theists who serve a theistic God through ritual, described in the many narratives of the *Puranas*, and with a devotional sense of love and duty.

Spiders and Silkworms

Judaism has its own textual and theological voices of divine immanence and the unknowability of the divine that are important to cite in any Jewish-Hindu encounter. Many modern students of the Kabbalah know the following famous parallel between the *Zohar* and the Upanishads.

The *Isha Upanishad* explains how the Lord who created the world is separate but permeates the created world by using the metaphors of a spider weaving a web and then a light pervading all places even in their hidden most elements. This light interconnects everything under the divine:

Just like a spider weaves a web born forth of its own inner substance, one sole principle of light seems to surround itself with an apparent universe that's made of its own being, self-become. To it, each one of us may turn, from compromise with outward show, to find all separateness dissolved in unobscured reality. This single principle of light, pervading all the universe, is hidden in all beings: as the inner self in everyone. It oversees all seeming acts: as that which lives in everything, observing all experiences, itself completely unattached to any kind of changing act. (6.10– 11)

In comparison, the *Zohar*, the classic text of Jewish mysticism, sees the world as the silk spun by the Divine Absolute; here, the divine emerges from unmanifest hiddenness to manifest with qualities. The divine light is revealed but not revealed, creating for itself a garment of the world for the betterment of humanity:

Zohar, Concealed of the Concealed, struck its aura. The aura touched and did not touch this point. Then this Beginning emanated and made itself a palace for its glory and its praise. There it sowed the seed of holiness to give birth for the benefit of the universe. The secret is: "Her stock is a holy seed" (Isaiah 6:13) *Zohar*, sowing a seed for its glory like the seed of fine purple silk. The silkworm wraps itself within and makes itself a palace. This palace is its praise and a benefit

to all. [\[14\]](#)

NOTES

- [1.](#) Harvey Alper, *Understanding Mantras* (Albany: State University of New York, 1989); Fritz Staal, *Discovering the Vedas: Origins, Mantras, Rituals, Insights* (Penguin Books India, 2008); idem, *Ritual and Mantras: Rules Without Meaning* (Motilal Banarsidass, 1996); Jan Gonda, *Vedic Ritual: The non-Solemn Rites* (Amsterdam 1980); idem, "The Indian Mantra," *Oriens* (1963) Vol. 16, pages 258–259; André Padoux, *Vac The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras* (Albany: Suny, 1990).
- [2.](#) Fritz Staal, *Discovering the Vedas: Origins, Mantras, Rituals, Insights* (Penguin Books India, 2008); idem, *Ritual and Mantras: Rules Without Meaning* (Motilal Banarsidass 1996); Jan Gonda, *Vedic Ritual: The non-Solemn Rites* (Amsterdam, 1980); idem, "The Indian Mantra," *Oriens*, vol. 16 (1963), 258–259; André Padoux, *Vac The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras* (Albany, Suny 1990); Harvey Alper, *Understanding Mantras* (Albany: State University of New York, 1989).
- [3.](#) Barbara A. Holdrege, *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture* (State University of New York Press, 1996).
- [4.](#) Naomi Janowitz, *Icons of Power: Ritual Practices in Late Antiquity* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2002), 24.
- [5.](#) Daniel Sperber, "On the AUM and the Tetragrammaton," in *Dharma and Halacha: Comparative Studies in Hindu and Jewish Philosophy and Religion*, ed. Ithamar Theodor and Yudit Kornberg Greenberg, 203–210 (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018).
- [6.](#) Moshe Idel, *Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany: SUNY, 1988).
- [7.](#) Aryeh Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah* (York Beach, ME: Weiser, 1981); David Shulman, "Is There an Indian Connection to Sefer Yesira?" *Aleph* 2 (2002) pp. 191–199; Yehuda Liebes, *Torat Ha-Yetzirah shel Sefer Yetzirah* (Schocken, Tel-Aviv, 2000); Hans Jenny, *Cymatics* (Basilus Press, 1967).
- [8.](#) Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Rig Veda* (New York: Penguin 1981); Kathryn McClymond, *Beyond Sacred Violence: A Comparative Study of Sacrifice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); George Praseed, *Sacrifice and Cosmos: Yajna and the Eucharist in Dialogue* (New Delhi: D.K.

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[9.](#) Brian K. Smith and Wendy Doniger, “Sacrifice and Substitution: Ritual Mystification and Mythical Demystification,” *Numen*, Vol. 36, Fasc. 2 (Dec., 1989): 189–224.

[10.](#) A. C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada, *Bhagavad-Gītā as It Is*. (Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1983), 18:3.

[11.](#) Robert Ernest Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1921); Patrick Olivelle, trans., *Upaniṣads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Barbara A. Holdrege, *Veda and Torah* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).

[12.](#) Anantanand Rambachan, *The Advaita Worldview: God, World, and Humanity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 59.

[13.](#) Robert E Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, introduction.

[14.](#) Daniel C. Matt, *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment (Classics of Western Spirituality Series)* (Paulist Press, 1983).

Chapter 3

Darshan-Philosophies

The classical approach to the study of the ancient texts of the Vedas is through the six schools—or literally, six visions (*darshanas*) of reality—of Indian philosophy.^[1] Every trained representative of Hinduism—whether a Brahmin, a swami of an ashram, or a university philosophy professor—works with this conceptual rubric of the six Orthodox philosophies as their theological language.

Six Orthodox Schools

1. *Nyaya* is a rational scholastic type of argumentation and logic that defends the proofs for God, revelation, and consequence of one's actions.
2. Vaisheshika teaches atomism, naturalism, and limits knowledge to perception and inference. This philosophy of science was over time merged with and absorbed in *Nyaya* study becoming the later analytic philosophy of Navya-Nyaya.
3. *Mimamsa* promotes the study of the Vedas as legal codes with an eye to determination of how to derive the law. As befits a formal legal system, it prides itself on avoiding any question of God, nature, or reality outside the law.
4. *Vedanta*—a study of the Absolute Ultimate Reality.
5. *Samkhya* is the natural psychology of India, used by many of the denominations and sacred writings, which teaches emanation, matter-spirit dualism, and evolution of consciousness.
6. Yoga is the process of overcoming ignorance by means of knowledge, meditation, and right living. Yoga absorbed much of *Samkhya* philosophy.

Originally, these approaches competed for members; one was a follower of either *Mimamsa*, *Vedanta*, or Yoga. Later, these approaches became a hierarchy beginning with *Mimamsa* and culminating in *Vedanta*. Now, they work as a classic canon in which the student masters the entire corpus.

This chapter deals directly with *Nyaya*, *Mimamsa*, *Vedanta*, and Yoga. *Samkhya* will be discussed as part of the chapters on emanation schemes and Yoga. The rough Jewish equivalents to these four schools are correspondingly philosophy (*Nyaya*), *halakhah* (*Mimamsa*), mysticism (*Vedanta*), and musar/kabbalistic meditation (yoga).

NYAYA AND MONOTHEISM

Nyaya means rule, method of reasoning, or judgment, and it deals with logic, evidence, inference, and argumentation. *Nyaya* functions as Hinduism's logical backbone, similar to the way Aristotelianism functioned for more than a millennium in the West. Today, university students write on topics like *Nyaya* and Aristotle, *Nyaya* and analytic philosophy, or *Nyaya* and Habermas. [\[2\]](#)

The *Nyaya* school of philosophical speculation is recorded in texts known as the *Nyaya Sstras*, mainly written by Aksapada Gautama in the second century CE. The *Nyaya* approach argues for a theistic monotheistic position, revelation, and reward and punishment. In short, the theological parts of *Nyaya* and the Western scholastic proofs for God converge in goal and argumentation. *Nyaya* insists on several versions of the cosmological argument to prove a theistic God. Also, like Western scholasticism, it argues the need for revelation and reward for actions based on both the Vedas and logic.

The Indian academic Gopikamohan Bhattacharyya wrote: "The belief in monotheism is rather common to all theistic schools of Indian philosophy." [\[3\]](#) The *Nyaya* school has been adopted by the majority of the other Indian schools as preparatory. Therefore, you will find few traditional Hindu leaders trained in the university, temple, or ashram who deny theism at the scholastic philosophic level. There are many exceptions and non-theist Hindu approaches; however, Hindu leaders who come to an interfaith gathering as a representative of his tradition will know *Nyaya* theism. American ethnographers who lack scholastic training treat the Hindu popular stories as the main repository of Hindu theology. Both traditional Indian philosophy and contemporary Indian university philosophy disagrees with many popular stories.

God

Nyaya's Hinduism is theistic. Yet, they may not like the question, since it betrays Western concerns and Western religious categories, but the answer will still be yes. Because *Nyaya* teaches the scholastic arguments for theism including the cosmological argument.

Early *Nyaya* authors wrote very little about *Ishvara* (God, the Supreme Soul). However, when later Buddhists in India became strictly atheistic, later Naiyayikas entered into disputes with the Buddhists and used inference to prove the existence of God. They also expanded the list of God's attributes from just knowledge and volition to include other attributes, such as providence and beneficence; these shifts brought *Nyaya's* conception of God in line with Western forms of monotheism.

In the tenth century, the *Nyaya* logician, Udayana, gave nine arguments to prove the existence of the Creator God. Four of these arguments are familiar to a Jewish audience from medieval Jewish thought: the cosmological argument, the composite nature of the world, faith in scripture, and the moral argument.

Cosmological argument: An effect is produced by a cause; thus, the universe must also have a cause. The active cause of the world must have an absolute knowledge of all the material of creation, and hence it must be God. Subsequently, the creation proves the existence of the Creator.

Composite nature of the world: Atoms are inactive and properties are unphysical. So, it must be God who creates the world with his will by causing the atoms to join. It is possible to see the hand of a wise organizer behind the systematic grouping of the ultimate atoms into dyads and molecules. That final organizer is God.

The Vedas: The Vedas, are the source of eternal knowledge. Their knowledge is free from fallacies. Their authors cannot be human beings because human knowledge is limited. Hence, only God can be the creator of the Vedas. Thus, his existence is proved from his being the author of the Vedas, which he revealed to various sages.

Moral Argument: The world is governed by moral laws that are objective and universal. Hence, there exists God, who promulgates these laws.

My Jewish audience should note that in *Nyaya* monotheism, there is also the argument that such a God (*Ishvara*) can only be one theistic God. For example, they argue that we cannot assume there were many gods (*devas*) who wrote the Vedas and created the world. This is because the law of parsimony bids us assume only one such writer and creator, namely the Lord.

From another angle, *Nyaya* argues that there can be no trust or confidence in a non-eternal and non-omniscient being; only an eternal and omniscient being can be trusted. Therefore, if one rejects an omniscient theistic God, then the Vedic tradition is simultaneously overthrown. In other words, Udayana says that the polytheist would have to give elaborate proofs for the existence and origin of his several celestial spirits, none of which would be logical. Thus, it is much more logical to assume only a single eternal and omniscient God.

Based on *Nyaya*, polytheism and a multiplicity of gods make no sense in Orthodox Indian philosophy. On the other hand, one should not call this theism monotheism, which implies a single god to the exclusion of all other divinity or *devas*, rather, it reflects a Creator Supreme Being.

In contrast, for the *Mimamsa* school and some forms of *Vedanta*, one cannot meaningfully speak of a Creator God. In these schools, *Brahman* is creator only by implication, since there is nothing outside the absolute reality. Nevertheless, many contemporary *Vedanta* followers certainly do refer to God, the absolute, as creator. In addition, it is worth noting that when Christians theologically engage the denominational Vaishnavite and Shaivite theology, they comfortably read it as referring to the Creator God.

Nyaya explains the concept of karma theistically. One's actions lead to future action; God is like a wise and benevolent father who directs his son to do certain things, according to his gifts, capacities, and previous attainments. Similarly, God directs all living beings to do certain actions and experience the natural consequences of these actions that are consistent with their past conduct and character. Thus, God is the moral governor of the world of living beings including ourselves, the impartial dispenser of the fruits of our actions, and the supreme arbiter of our joys and sorrows.

Jewish Thought

The *Nyaya* school of Indian philosophy argues for a theistic position from a teleological/causal argument for God similar to the Kalam argument in Saadia Gaon's writings. In the tenth century, we already have Brahmins debating their positions with Jews and Muslims. In fact, Saadyah actually quotes Brahmin philosophers on the topic of creation and argues with them.

The major difference between Saadia's epistemology and *Nyaya* is that *Nyaya* assumes eternal matter and Saadia argues against the Brahmins for the creation of matter; this is a seemingly basic Hindu-Jewish divide. Yet, not long after Saadyah, the great medieval Jewish philosophers Abraham Ibn Ezra and Gersonides both affirmed primordial matter.

In many ways, similar to Maimonides' rejection of anthropomorphism, even as he stated that the Torah speaks in "the language of men" using descriptions of God's body and emotions. So too for *Nyaya*, God's human body forms and animal forms are symbolic as part of the "language of men."

Nyaya epistemology teaches four sources of knowledge (pramanas)—perception, inference, comparison, and testimony—very similar to the Jewish Saadia's four sources of knowledge. *Nyaya* acknowledges that sometimes there is conflicting evidence, which creates doubt about truth. Doubt is a state of uncertainty that reflects the mind's wavering between different conflicting views about the same object. Saadia also starts his philosophic work with a space for methodological doubt.

From Nyaya to Vedanta

The realism of *Nyaya* was used, modified, and rejected by later *Vedanta* thinkers the same way the realism of Saadia (and Maimonides) was appropriated by later kabbalists. *Nyaya* is accepted by *Vedanta* as a first step, the way many medieval kabbalists saw philosophy as a first step to Kabbalah.

For example, the theistic non-*advaitan* approach of Ramanuja has reservations on the first cause theism of *Nyaya*. Ramanuja teaches that the divine needs to shower the world with His own goodness and blessing, he

moves from a philosophic deity to a personal one. Similarly, the kabbalist rabbi Moses Chaim Luzzatto (d. 1747) in his book *The Way of God: Derech Hashem* accepts Maimonides's philosophic God but moves beyond it to a personal God that created the world out of His goodness and showers blessings. So while *Nyaya* postulates that God creates to show his majesty and glory, Ramanuja and Luzzatto has God create as part of His very nature to shower blessings to people.

Heterodox

There are also several schools of thought seen as outside orthodox Hindu thinking. (1) Buddhism is heterodox because it limits knowledge to the direct senses without tradition or inference, hence its practitioners reject the Vedas, God, the soul, and the reality of material objects. The *Nyaya* view, as well as the *Vedanta* view, evolved specifically as a refutation of Buddhist thought. (2) Jainism is heterodox because it teaches the independent existence of soul and matter, and the absence of a Supreme Divine. (3) Lokayata was a philosophy of skepticism and materialism, founded c. 321–185 BCE by Carvaka. They rejected the Vedas because they deemed them as tainted by the three faults of untruth, self-contradiction, and tautology. As materialists, they mocked the spiritual concepts of liberation, reincarnation, and accumulation of merit or demerit through the performance of certain actions. Carvaka taught that consciousness was solely a product of the material body and that it ended with the destruction of the body.

This material secular philosophy remains a constant intellectual foil to refute in the Orthodox systems. More importantly, the tradition of Carvaka allows for the grounding of modern philosophies of Hindu secularity, materialism, and even Marxism.

MIMAMSA

What do the Vedas mean in Hinduism? Simply put, they mean what the tradition interprets them to mean. For most traditionalists, the meaning is defined through *Mimamsa*, which holds that the Vedas teach a set of procedural ritual laws to follow. For a follower of *Mimamsa*, the

introduction to your Western paperback edition of the Vedas about ancient deities and kingship is just plain wrong. The academic historic-critical meaning is not the same as the meaning within a tradition. The *Mimamsa* approach shows that by the first centuries of the Common Era, the Vedas' depiction of Bronze Age gods of fire, wind, and the sun was already a memory. While the nineteenth-century German philosopher Schopenhauer found the royal hymns to the gods ennobling and heroic, the Brahmins of the Talmudic era did not.

For *Mimamsa*, Vedic texts are not authored, eternal, and transcendent; they teach the practical actions of living the *dharma*. Thus, according to *Mimamsa*, the Vedas are a timeless revelation of eternal truths, which consist only of rituals to follow. They are unconcerned with all the stories, gods, and ancient metaphysics that are hard to understand and often avoided. [\[4\]](#)

According to *Mimamsa*, we only know what we can perceive. We cannot perceive an object called morality; therefore, we have no direct access to morality or truth except through the Vedic prescriptions. God does not author Vedic wisdom as a scripture; rather the knowledge is eternal wisdom.

The *Mimamsa* school most emphasizes the *Brahmanas*, the parts of Vedas that are a commentary on Vedic rituals. While the gods themselves gradually recede and fade into mere grammatical datives, the *Mimamsa* school's interest is most absorbed by the ceremonial details of the rituals. According to *Mimamsa*, a Vedic deity is not described by its moral or intellectual qualities, but instead as "that which is signified, in a sacrificial injunction, by the fourth case-ending." [\[5\]](#) In short, a deity is necessary as a name to be offered oblation at a sacrifice. The primary object of performing a sacrifice is not to please any deity, nor is it the purification of the soul or moral improvement. Rather, a ritual is performed merely because the Vedas command its performance.

In ritual Hinduism, the judge of correct action or correct law is only whether the performance is based on the Vedic rules, as understood by *Mimamsa*. Vedas are only the source of what is to be done, therefore they cannot be changed or falsified since there is no acceptable outside source. There is no ethic outside of the Vedas. In the language of Plato's *Euthyphro*,

the good is good because it is in the Vedas, not because the Vedas are good. The *Mimamsa* rules and methods of study are, in turn, applied to the later ritual texts.

The term *mimamsa* literally means critical investigation; sometimes referred to as *Purva Mimamsa* (“prior” inquiry), in contrast to *Uttara Mimamsa* (“later” inquiry), the *Vedanta* which emphasized study of spiritual knowledge of the Upanishads. The foundational text for the *Mimamsa* school is the *Purva Mimamsa Sutra*s of Jaimini (circa third to first century BCE). The school gathers momentum in the Gupta period with Shabara’s commentary on Jaimini’s *Purva Mimamsa Sutra*s, and reaches its apex in the seventh to eighth centuries CE with *Kumarila Bhatta* and *Prabhakara*. The school majorly contributed to the decline of Buddhism in India.

In the fourteenth century CE, *Vedanta Deshika* combined the views of the *Mimamsa* with the *Vedanta* schools with the theistic worship of Vaishnavism. This synthetic approach reflects actual contemporary practice in which one is simultaneously *Mimamska* and *Vaishnavite*: one follows the ritual rules scrupulously while simultaneously following a denomination such as Vaishnavism in order to develop a relationship with God.

Philosophy

Mimamsa holds that desire leads directly to action, since desire is the recognition that one has an obligation. In contrast, *Nyaya*, like medieval Jewish thought, holds that cognition leads to volition and, from there, to action. For *Mimamsa*, if you desire heaven, then you perform the ritual. Human agency, or one’s capacity to act, is determined only by recognition of the Vedic injunctive. The primary injunctions of the law command the performance of an action, which creates a desire to act. In essence, one wishing to attain heaven should perform the ritual act.

Karma itself means deeds, acts, or works. The theory states that good actions produce good fruit. Actions create mental impressions through their positive and negative results. They are, therefore, the seeds of future activity planted in the mind, and whose resulting effects are both good and bad. It is similar to the rabbinic idea of *mitzvah goreret mitzvah*, “one good deed will bring another good deed, one transgression will bring another transgression,” (*Avot* 4:2). One trains the self to desire the right things. Like

some Jewish Orthodox thinkers, the goal is submission to do the correct ritual.

Mimamsa removes God and divine agency from the discussion of rules. An agent needs a body; since God has no body, God is not a legal agent. *Mimamsa* has no discussion or place for a personal God in its system of rules, since we do not have access to God or any legal place for God. Modern commentaries debate whether ancient *Mimamsa* is atheistic or theistic, since the law is followed solely because it is the revealed eternal truth without reference to God or the soul.

From an Orthodox Jewish perspective based on the *halakhah*, this approach is similar to keeping all the Jewish commands with knowledge (*daat*) that the action is a required commandment without a need for any specific intention about God (*kavvanah*). Like a Jewish halakhic text, the *Mimamsa* texts focus on and are organized around the actions a person needs to perform.

Mimamsa does not have a required faith in deities. In the faculty lounge at Banaras Hindu University, where I taught, one of the Brahmin philosophy professors specializing in *Nyaya* and *Mimamsa* would always be quick to comment, “if He exists” after someone mentioned God. He was expressing traditional *Mimamsa* Orthodoxy, not modern disbelief. As an Orthodox Brahmin, he was quite strict in his personal observances and did not see God as necessary for a sense of obligatory belief.

For *Mimamsa*, according to the great commentary, Kumarila, an embodied God is inherently contradictory because then He could not be revered by different people in different places simultaneously if he were linked to a body. Therefore, for this school, Hinduism has no embodied Divine and no physical attributes to God. Everything physical about God can only be seen from our perspective. At best, the deities of the *Mimamsa* are like the immortal characters of classical epics; they are not existing persons, rather, they are types.

Halakhah

Currently, comparisons between Hindu law and Jewish law are an academic trend. I would like to highlight that Professor Donald Davis at the University of Texas at Austin wrote a 2008 article entitled “Before Virtue:

Halakhah, Dharmasastra, and What the Law Can Create.” In it, Davis finds that Rabbi Soloveitchik’s *Halakhic Man* and dharmashastra share the goal of creating the ideal human through law—the ideal halakhic man and the ideal dharmashastra man, respectively. For Davis, Hindu law and *halakhah* create the full ideal of what humans were meant to be, both normatively and aspirationally.

Davis points out that in both the practice of law gives virtue without any prior need for values or any aspiration to virtue. In both *dharma* and *halakhah*, the most important thing is to value the traditional practices using law as the instrument and as the embodiment of that conviction sustaining tradition. Davis shows how Torah and *Veda* are both mediated by complex rules—they are not to be read unmediated. Additionally, the law takes precedence over other forms of piety; a Jewish *zaddik* or a Hindu *sadhu* are each considered holy and perform a variety of virtuous acts, but they do not define virtue, which only the *dharma* and *halakhah* can.

In many ways, *Mimamsa* bears greater similarities to the thought of the modern Jewish thinker Yeshayahu Leibovitz (1903–1994). Leibovitz taught that *mitzvot* are to be performed solely as divine decrees without any reasons. We do actions because they are mandated in the texts.^[6] The Law is worldly in that it shapes one’s daily life, creating a ritual Orthodoxy easily recognizable by both contemporary Orthodox Hindus and Orthodox Jews. As one person introduced herself upon meeting me: “I am an Orthodox Hindu,” meaning she keeps all the ritual laws.

Rules of Texts

The similarity between Talmudic reasoning and the *Mimamsa* was originally noted in 1893 by Edward Byles Cowell, Cambridge professor of Sanskrit. He pointed out how both systems read a sacred text with exegetical rules to derive ritual actions.^[7] Much of this basic list of Hindu rules seems similar to rabbinical exegetical rules. Here are a few example rules of *Mimamsa* that have almost direct parallels to the rabbinic rules of exegesis:

1. The *Sarthakyata* axiom, which means that every word and sentence must have some meaning. (Harvard Scholar James Kugel coined the

phrase omnisignificance for its use in rabbinic Midrash.)

2. The *Arthaikatva* axiom, which states that a double meaning should not be attached to a word or sentence occurring at one and the same place. This one is similar to the rabbinic rule of *gezerah shavah*.
3. The *Prakarana* axiom, which states that doubts regarding the meaning of a word should be resolved by looking at the rest of the provision. This one is similar to the rabbinic principle of learning from the matter.
4. The *Gunapradhan* axiom, which states that if a word or sentence purporting to express a subordinate idea clashes with the principal idea, the former must be adjusted to the latter, or must be disregarded altogether. Rabbinic understanding follows the latter, for a general followed by an enumeration (*klal uprat*), Judaism follows the detail, then follows the general principle.
5. The *Samanjasya* axiom, which states that all attempts should be made to reconcile apparently conflicting texts. This is common in many rabbinic commentaries.
6. The *Kamutika* axiom is the familiar *a fortiori*, better known as the *kal ve homer*.

Mimamsa rules are based on linguistic analysis of subject, a fixed coordinate to determine the rules of the statement. For example, it uses linguistic analysis to determine if a specific obligation concerns the person or the object, much like the halakhic distinction between laws on objects and people (*heftza, gavra*). Hindu culture had an advanced science of linguistics, so sacred texts are understood more by linguistics than law, unlike Jewish *halakhah* that operates more by law than linguistics.

THE VEDANTA WORLDVIEW: ADVAITAN AND DVAITA

While the Upanishads have many statements about the Absolute Oneness of *Brahman*, the *Vedanta* philosophic school focuses on a few key lines, called the Mahavakyas, as interpretive keys. These lines express the one universal message of the ultimate unity of the individual (*atman*) with Supreme (*Brahman*), and that a realized self knows that it is identical with the Absolute *Brahman*.^[8]

Basic Statements Mahavakyas

The Mahavakyas are:

- “*Brahman* is *Prajna*” (Aitareya Upanishad 3.3 of the *Rig Veda*)
- “This Self (*atman*) is *Brahman*” (Mandukya Upanishad 1.2 of the *Atharva Veda*)
- “Thou art That” (Chandogya Upanishad 6.8.7 of the *Sama Veda*)
- “I am *Brahman*,” (Brhadaranyaka Upanishad 1.4.10 of the *Yajur Veda*)

The Basic Statement: That Thou Art

“That thou Art” in its full context in the dialogue between Uddalaka and his son Shvetaketu. The meaning of this saying is that the Self—in its original, pure, primordial state—is wholly identifiable or identical with the ultimate reality that is the ground and origin of all phenomena.

The *Brahma Sutra* (circa 450 CE), which is ascribed to the sage Badarayana (sometime between 200 BCE–200 CE) is a Talmudic-like corpus, in which passages like this one from the Upanishads were developed into a worldview. The *Brahma Sutra*, in turn, was subject to medieval commentaries including those by Sankara, Ramanuja, Sankara, and Madhva.

Sankara explains these texts as the human soul finding monistic unity with the *Brahman*, called *Advaita* (not-two in Sanskrit). It is a recognition that the true self, *atman*, which is pure consciousness, is the same as the highest reality, *Brahman*, which is also pure consciousness. In short, there is no twoness or division in reality—the self (*atman*) and highest reality (*Brahman*) are one and undifferentiated.

For Ramanuja, these texts demonstrate that the human soul becomes part of *Brahman*, called *dvaita* (two in Sanskrit). These texts recognize the soul’s ability to merge as part of the highest reality, *Brahman*, even though *Brahman* has other differentiating qualities. One has a mystical relationship, or one of grace, with the ultimate reality, but *Brahman* remains greater than individual souls. Madhva proffers a theistic and dualist understanding in which *atman* is *Brahman*, which means “your soul is a servant of the Supreme.”

To return to Sankara, the soul (*atman*) moves from a sense of self,

limits, and personal identity to a self-existent awareness, limitlessness, and non-duality. In other words, the self is non-different from the infinite. One seeks to attain liberation/release by acquiring knowledge of the identity of *atman* and *Brahman*. “Thou” stands for the innermost self, stripped of all egoistic tendencies, called *atman*, in each one of us. Attaining this liberation takes a long preparation and training under the guidance of a guru.

In Judaism, the self is not limitless and non-dual. Even more importantly, God and humans are separate and the world is not an illusion. Judaism lacks this *Vedanta* element in its biblical and Talmudic core. Therefore, there is little point in comparing Jewish learning with the attainment of realization under a guru.

Maya and Avidya

Brahman is hidden, but is manifest with the help of maya, a creation of the world of appearances. *Vedanta* considers this creation through maya as illusory. It does not mean that the world is not real; rather, maya has created the world of appearances. The world exists, however, it is neither ultimately real, nor wholly unreal and illusory. Different schools interpret these concepts differently.

Humans do not know about the ultimate oneness of reality and that the world is only maya because of the effect of our natural ignorance (*avidya*), which suppresses the real nature of things and presents something else in its place. *Avidya* relates to the individual self (*atman*), while maya is an adjunct of the cosmic Self (*Brahman*). The ignorance that keeps humanity captive is not a lack of erudition; rather, it is ignorance about the nature of “Being” (*Sat*). *Brahman* without its maya is identical to *atman* without its *avidya*.

Four principle explanations of this scheme are as follows: Shankara formulated a sharp doctrine of non-duality in which *Brahman* alone is real. The world is illusory. The individual is none other than God. For Ramanuja, there is equal non-difference and difference between the individual self as a part of the whole, which is “tat.” One can have oneness but the differences remain. For the dualist Madhva—“*Atman*, thou art not that,” means you are a servant of the Supreme (Vishnu)” God and man are separate. Caitanya mediates between the dualist and monist positions, with a position called *Acintya Bheda Abheda* moving between both poles of dualist and monist as

true in which an inconceivable oneness and difference between individual self as a part of the whole.

Most kabbalistic thought, such as Moses Cordovero (sixteenth century) views on oneness of reality, is nevertheless closer to Madhva's dualism in that the soul and the divine remain distinct. Furthermore, Judaism does not emphasize a direct experience for understanding reality outside of religion and ritual. Eighteenth-century Hasidism has some of the most succinct versions of non-duality within Judaism. Ascribed to the Baal Shem is the following: "Nothing exists in this world except the absolute Unity which is God" (Sefer Baal Shem Tov, Vaetchanan, 13). His disciple, the Maggid of Mezrich, wrote that: "God fills every place in all worlds, both spiritual and physical, and there is no place empty of God."^[9] Most schools of Hasidut that speak of non-duality really fall into the Ramanuja or Caitanya categories, not the non-dual *advaitan* approach of Sankara. Sankara's position presumes that the material world, senses, actions, and perceptions are all maya. For Hasidut, the insight that all is divine is a temporary attainment followed by a return (*ratzo ve shov*), in which the mystic returns to the tangible world of mizvot and this material world.

Tradition and Experience Svadhyaya and Anubhava

"Verily he becomes *Brahman*, who knows *Brahman*" (Mundaka Upanishad III.ii.9). How does one know *Brahman* in order to become *Brahman*? Besides the foundational Vedic scriptures and proper reasoning (*svadhyaya*), one also needs experiential knowledge (*anubhava*) aided by spiritual practices.

Shankara holds direct cognition to be a separate form of knowledge from the contemplation of truths. Experience (*anubhava*) is the realization of the identity of the individual self and *Brahman*; this experience does not depend on any process, and it is the highest state of development. Direct cognition is never mere book knowledge. "One may be well versed in all the transcendental literature of the Vedas, but if he fails to be acquainted with the Supreme, then it must be concluded that all of his education is like the burden of a beast or like one's keeping a cow without milking capacity" (Bhag.11.11.18). Knowledge of the oneness of self provides freedom from

hate, delusion, and sorrow.

Modern twentieth-century interpretations have recast this experiential knowledge (*anubhava*) as personal experience, in line with modernist, Unitarian and Theosophical influences. According to Vivekananda, personal experience is the ground and source of all religious traditions, the infallible source of liberating knowledge, and the ultimate source of spiritual knowledge. However, *anubhava* does not traditionally center around some sort of mystical experience, rather, it is centered on the correct knowledge of *Brahman*.

World as Illusion

Understanding the world after realizing its illusory nature is usually done through the Snake and Rope analogy. Imagine a man walks at night on a dark path and feels a snake bite him on the leg. The snake is lying on the ground just a few feet from him. Lying on the floor, he weeps because of the pain and the knowledge that his life is most likely over. A nearby person hearing him shines a light on the snake and the snake turns out to be nothing more than a rope. Now the question is: during the incident, was the snake real or unreal? The answer is that, subjectively, the snake was very real. However, objectively, the presence of the snake was illusory and created by his mind.

Similarly, this world has its own subjective reality, but upon gaining knowledge of *Brahman*, this relative reality subsides and only the absolute reality of *Brahman* remains. In the story, the snake existed only at the time of the incident (the present), while the rope existed in the past, the present, as well as the future. Likewise, the world exists in the present moment only—although it is a pretty long moment—while *Brahman* existed before the creation of the world, exists in the present, and will still exist for ever after the universe's dissolution.

Shankara

Adi Shankara, early eighth century CE, was the most renowned exponent of the non-dualistic *Advaita Vedanta* School of philosophy, a towering figure in the history of Hindu thought, and religious life. He wrote many works and established monasteries. There are at least fourteen different known biographies of his life. He wrote copious commentaries on the Vedic canon (*Brahma Sutras*, Upanishads, and *Bhagavad Gita*), presenting his non-dualistic worldview.

Shankara criticized the ritual-oriented *Mimamsa* school of Hinduism, turning from Hindu realism to *advaitan* idealism. Shankara asserts that rituals and rites can help draw and prepare the mind for the journey to self-knowledge. Nevertheless, he discouraged extra ritual worship such as oblations to *devas*.

Shankara drew a conceptual line between the Orthodox Hindu position of *Vedanta* and the Heterodox Buddhist one. While Buddhists assert that there is “no Soul, no Self,” Shankara, as representative of Hinduism, asserts “*Atman* (Soul, Self) exists.”^[10] For Buddhists, Nirvana is the liberating realization and acceptance that there is no self (*anatman*). For Hindus, *moksha* is the liberating realization and acceptance of self and universal soul, the consciousness of one’s oneness with all existence, and understanding of the whole universe as the self. Shankara travelled all over India to help restore the study of the Upanishads and defend against Buddhism. Shankara explained that all deities were but different forms of the one *Brahman*, the invisible Supreme Being. When one chooses a personal deity (*Ishvara*), empirical reality, which is maya-illusion, is the potency (*shakti*), in the personal God (*Ishvara*).

Difference from Yoga

Even though Yoga may sound similar to *Vedanta*, there are several major differences between the two. Yoga is a form of experiential mysticism or bliss gained through growth, while *Advaita Vedanta* is a form of monistic personalism, in that, the realization of the person—the *atman*—as the

ultimate explanatory principle of all reality. Unlike Yoga that differentiates spirit and matter according to *Vedanta*, there are no two parallel entities but only one non-dual limitless whole. Shankara considered the purity and steadiness of mind achieved through Yoga as only an aid to gaining ultimate knowledge, but thought the yogic state of mind cannot in itself give rise to knowledge of *Brahman*.

YOGA: MORALITY

Maimonides opens his *Guide of the Perplexed* with a description of how humanity fell from the realm of truth to that of false thoughts and desires. The way to restore the original state is through understanding the true nature of reality in order to transcend the falsehood generated by desire. When I taught this passage in Banaras University, the professor sitting in on my class declared: this is Yoga!^[11]

History

In terms of literary sources, there is evidence as early as the oldest Vedic text, the *R̥g Veda*, that there were yogi-like ascetics on the margins of the Vedic world. However, archaeologists claim, based on seals found in Indus Valley sites (c. 3000–c. 1500 BCE), that Yoga itself is not Vedic, but an independent ancient tradition. The Mahabharata epic also preserves significant material representing the evolution of Yoga. Indeed, the terms yoga and yogi occur about nine hundred times throughout the epic. Only two instances refer to posture (*asana*); the rest refer to austerity, control, devotion, and proper behavior.

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali are 196 Indian aphorisms that were compiled around 400 CE (traditional sources list the date as 500 BCE–200 CE) by Patanjali, together with his own commentary. Patanjali systematized the preexisting traditions and authored what came to be the seminal text for Yoga discipline. There was never one uniform school of Yoga; there was a plurality of variants and different conceptualizations of practices that were termed yoga. Patanjali's version made a comeback due to the efforts of Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) in the twentieth century.

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali were the most translated ancient Indian

text in the medieval era. As explained above in chapter 2, they were available in Arabic and Judeo-Arabic and were known to medieval Jewish intellectuals. This specific text fell into obscurity for nearly seven hundred years, from the twelfth to the nineteenth century, because most practitioners were following a living tradition of yoga integrated into their denominational works. Before the twentieth century, practitioners used other works, part of the vast literature on Hatha Yoga, tantric yoga, and *pashupata yoga*.

Yoga, as defined in the classic Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, is about control of the mind. While Maimonides tells one how to train the mind through philosophy, Patanjali gives a more psychological answer. That is, the sutras state that Yoga is the restriction of the fluctuation of consciousness (*citta*). According to Rutgers University scholar Edwin Bryant, Patanjali's Yoga "essentially consists of meditative practices culminating in attaining a state of consciousness free from all modes of active or discursive thought, and of eventually attaining a state where consciousness is unaware of any object external to itself."^[12]

The objective of Patanjali's Yoga, as it is laid out in the *Yoga Sutra*, is for the yogi to recognize the true nature of the universe, that is, that pure consciousness (*purusa*) is distinct from mere matter (*prakrti*), which includes our minds and our thoughts. In other words, the yogi does not seek oneness with the world; rather, he seeks to liberate himself from his attachment to the worldly.

However, the word Yoga has many shades of meaning that go beyond the formal definition of Patanjali, including union, integration, discipline, way, and behavior. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, yoga also includes love, skill in action and moderation in everything.

Hindu-derived Yoga is notably different than Buddhism in its focus on the self in contrast in the no self precepts of Buddhism. Yoga is all about taming and controlling the body, mind, and soul, while Buddhists do not accept such a self exists. The aim of yoga meditation is the separation of an eternal conscious self from unconscious matter and desires by means of understanding and practice. This is exactly what Maimonides and many Kabbalists thought.

Samkhya

As mentioned in the chapter above on *Nyaya*, *Samkhya* is one of the six *astika* (orthodox) schools of Indian philosophy. The Yoga school of philosophy absorbed most of the metaphysics, psychology, and natural science from *Samkhya*, and from there, many of the Hindu denominations accept *Samkhya* theories, which, in turn, led to *Samkhya* becoming the unofficial natural theology of India. *Samkhya* and Yoga philosophies conceptualize the universe as consisting of two realities: *purusa* (consciousness) and *prakriti* (matter or body). Thus, the *jiva* (living body) is bonded to the *prakriti*.

Another basic premise is the *gunas* (virtues) theory that divides actions, people, and foods into three innate tendencies. When *sattva guna* predominates an individual, the qualities of lucidity, wisdom, constructiveness, harmonious, and peacefulness manifest themselves; when *rajas* is predominant, attachment, craving, passion-driven activity, and restlessness manifest; and when *tamas* predominates in an individual, ignorance, delusion, destructive behavior, lethargy, and suffering manifests. As referring to food, the three *gunas* are vegetarian, spicy, and carnivorous.

Samkhya school suggests that *jnana* (knowledge) is a sufficient means to *moksha* (liberation). Yoga adds systematic techniques and practice combined with knowledge, which is the true path to liberation.

The Maimonidean approach has similarities to *Samkhya* because it is based around the knowledge-based world of medieval Jewish thought; it is not the world of *Vedanta*. Those kabbalists who have an intellectualist method of working toward liberation through meditative techniques would be a direct parallel to Yoga. For example, the kabbalist Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia (c. 1240–1291) is close to Yoga in that he grafted letter meditations onto a Maimonidean system.

Yoga has adepts work on their negative and detrimental thoughts, especially the five obstacles: ignorance, ego, desire, aversion, and clinging to life. By removing these traits of envy, desire to inflict harm, and intolerance—which are characteristics of *rajas* and *tamas*—the natural *sattva* mind can manifest. In the ensuing state of purity, the inclination for enlightenment is natural to the pure sattvic mind.

The Jewish pietistic literature is the equivalent of these ethical goals of the yogic path. The sixteenth-century Safed pious literature of Chaim Vital's *Shaarei Kedusha*, Moses Cordovero's *Tomer Devorah*, and Elijah DeVidas's *Reshit Hokhmah*, all of which could be analyzed and compared to the yogic path.

Ishvara—God

Patanjali differs from the closely related nontheistic *Samkhya* school in that Patanjali incorporates the concept of a personal deity (*Ishvara*). Hindu scholars, such as the eighth-century Adi Sankara, as well as many modern academic scholars, describes the Yoga school as the *Samkhya* school with God. The meaning of the God of Yoga is subject to interpretation and varies from a personal God to higher self, theistic with a personal God or it can be interpreted as a naturalistic God of the higher self. Patanjali's concept of God (*Isvara*) functions as a transformative catalyst or guide for aiding the yogi on the path to spiritual emancipation.

In the Yoga Sutras, devotion to *Isvara*, represented by the mystical syllable "Om" may be the most efficient method of achieving the goal of Yoga. This devotional type of meditation allows the realization of the mind and freedom from all obstacles. One can use other objects besides God to focus; but ultimately, the yogi is best advised to use God as meditative object, for the divine special spirit that can bestow perfection.

Eight-Limbed Path

The Yoga system of Patanjali consists of an eightfold path. The first four tenets are external and the last four are considered internal.

1. *Yama* (moral conduct): *yama* is fulfilled by noninjury to others, truthfulness, non-stealing, continence, and non-covetousness;
2. *Niyama* (religious observances): the *niyama* prescripts are purity of body and mind, contentment in all circumstances, self-discipline, self-study (contemplation), and devotion to God and guru;
3. *Asana* (right posture): the spinal column must be held straight, and the body firm in a comfortable position for meditation;

4. *Pranayama* (control of prana, subtle life currents);
5. *Pratyahara* (withdrawal of the senses from external objects);
6. *Dharana* (concentration): holding the mind to one thought;
7. *Dhyana* (meditation);
8. *Samadhi* (superconscious experience).

I. Five *Yamas*

Step one on the path are the Five *Yamas*, which are the universal ethical rules; they can be thought of as moral imperatives. The Yoga Sutra describes how these five behaviors become part of a person's daily life, purify human nature, and contribute to the health and happiness of society.

1. Ahimsa—Compassion for All Living Things

Ahimsa means not to injure or not to show cruelty to any creature or any person in any way whatsoever. This virtue is contextual because there are times for violence such as soldiers needed for defense. *Ahimsa* is, however, more than just lack of violence as adapted in Yoga. It means kindness, friendliness, and thoughtful consideration of other people and things. "One should respect all creatures," asserts Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, "recognizing . . . that all creatures are imbued with the Creator's wisdom, which itself makes them greatly deserving of honor. . . . If one were to disparage them, God forbid, this would reflect upon the honor of their Maker" (Tomer Devorah, chapter 2).

2. Satya—Commitment to

Truthfulness

Satya means to speak the truth, yet, it is not always desirable to speak the truth on all occasions. We have to consider what we say, how we say it, and in what way it could affect others. If speaking the truth has negative consequences for another, then it is better to say nothing. *Satya* should never come into conflict with our efforts to behave with *ahimsa*. In Judaism, truthful speech is emphasized in Talmudic ethics. *Lashon hora*, translated as “evil tongue,” is often used to describe gossip and one who engages in gossip commits a grave sin.

3. Asteya—Non-stealing

Asteya does not only mean not to steal or not to take anything that does not belong to us, it also means that if we are in a situation where someone entrusts something to us or confides in us, we do not take advantage of him or her. Simply, the practice of *asteya* implies not taking anything that has not been freely given. Within Judaism, there are vast discussions within the Talmud and in later Jewish law codes about the laws of watchmen, borrowing, agency, and not taking advantage or providing misinformation. Many short aphorisms in Judaism’s *Mishnah* on not being a trustworthy guardian become entire chapters of the Talmud.

4. Brahmacharya—Sense Control

Brahmacharya is used mostly in the sense of abstinence, particularly in

relationship to sexual activity. It does not necessarily imply celibacy, but rather, responsible behavior with respect to our goal of moving toward the truth. As the *tantra yoga* discussion pointed out, harnessing our sexual energy in certain situations allows us to elevate ourselves spiritually and cultivate safe relationships with others. In Orthodox Jewish circles, the pious refrain from physical contact with members of the opposite sex as a form of self-control similar to many yogic circles.

5. Aparigraha—Neutralizing the Desire to Acquire and Hoard Wealth

Aparigraha means to take only what is necessary, and not to take advantage of a situation or act greedy. We should only take what we have earned; if we take more, we are exploiting someone else. *Aparigraha* also implies letting go of our attachments to material things. Jewish texts combine this trait with the *Niyama* of *santosa*, contentment, see discussion below.

II. Niyamas

The second component of Patanjali's Yoga path is called *niyama*, which includes virtuous habits, behaviors and observances. These are positive virtues and personal observances to cultivate. Compared with the *yamas*, the *niyamas* are more intimate and personal. They refer to the attitude we adopt toward ourselves as we create a code for living soulfully.

1. Saucha—Purity

The first *niyama* is purity and cleanliness, a clearness of mind, speech and body. This includes the cleansing of the mind of its disturbing emotions like hatred, passion, anger, lust, greed, delusion, and pride. All Jewish works from the Talmud to Maimonides to Hasidism mention that the first step of the moral life is to rid oneself of pride, anger, passion, greed, and hatred.

2. Santosa—Contentment

Another *niyama* is modesty and the feeling of being content with what we have. To be at peace within and content with one's lifestyle; finding contentment even while experiencing life's difficulties, for life becomes a process of growth through all kinds of circumstances. It means being happy with what we have rather than being unhappy about what we don't have.

There are many examples in Judaism. "Who is wealthy, the one who is happy with his portion" (*Avot* 4:1). Rabbi Shlomo Ibn Gabirol wrote, "Who seeks more than he needs, hinders himself from enjoying what he has. In giving up what you don't need, you'll learn what you really need" (*Mivhar haPeninim*, 155). The Vilna Gaon taught the need to being satisfied with just the basics (*Even Shlemah*, 3).

3. Tapas—Disciplined Use of Energy

Tapas refers to the activity of keeping persistence and perseverance, and the austerity needed to keep the body fit or to confront and handle the inner urges without outer show. Judaism has had its ascetics and renunciants, but it is little remembered in modern Judaism.

4. Svadhyaya—Self Study

The fourth *niyama* refers to the examination or self-reflective consciousness. It means intentionally finding self-awareness in all our activities and efforts, even to the point of welcoming and accepting our limitations. It teaches us to be centered and non-reactive to the dualities. It includes study of Vedas, study of self, self-reflection, and self-examination of one's thoughts, speeches, and actions. Almost all Jewish ethical literature and medieval Jewish thought is about study and reflection, especially in the later *musar* movement of the nineteenth century.

5. Isvarapranidhana—Celebration of the Spiritual

Isvarapranidhana means to lay all your actions at the feet of God. It is the contemplation of God (*Ishvara*) to become attuned to God and God's will. It is the recognition that the spiritual suffuses everything and through our attention, we can attune ourselves with our role as part of the Creator. This is precisely what Westerners find spiritual in many presentations of Hinduism, that is, spirituality in all that we do and attunement. This is what Jews find in their own tradition through Jewish devotionism and piety, through Kabbalah and Hasidut, and its many God-centric theologies. However, the public face of contemporary Judaism for much of the last century was to avoid its own spirituality, with the result that many went to India to find spirituality.

III. Asana

Patanjali has relatively little to say about asana, a total of nine words,

which is less than 1 percent of the text. (See the subchapter below on Hatha Yoga for more about asana.)

IV. *Pranayama* (Breath Control)

Pranayama is the measuring, controlling, and directing of the breath. *Pranayama* controls the energy (*prana*) within the organism and to restore and maintain health. When the in-flowing breath is joined with the out-flowing breath, then attains perfect relaxation and balance of body.

Breathing technique is very important in yoga. The practices produce the actual physical sensation of heat (*tapas*) or the inner fire of purification. As the yogi follows the proper rhythmic patterns of slow deep breathing, the patterns strengthen the respiratory system, soothe the nervous system and reduce cravings. As desires and cravings diminish, the mind is set free and becomes a fit vehicle for concentration.

Judaism does not have a tradition of breath control. In the thirteenth century, Abulafia just instructs his followers to breath regularly. The fifteenth-century Yemeni Jewish scholar Alu'el, however, cites the Indian yogic teachings on the positive and negative qualities of right- and left-hand breaths from the yogic text, *The Pool of Nectar*, in his exegesis of Genesis (13:9).

YOGA: MEDITATION

The last four rungs of Yoga are the progressive sequence of moving inward of *Pratyahara* (looking inward), *Dharana* (concentration), *Dhyana* (meditation), and *Samadhi*. “Attention leads to concentration (*dharana*), which in turn leads to meditation (*dhyana*), culminating in absorption (*samadhi*) (*Yoga Sutra* 3.1–3).^[13]

Pratyahara is drawing within one’s awareness through retracting the sensory experience from external objects. One consciously closes one’s mind processes to the external sensory world in order not to be controlled by it. Instead, one seeks self-knowledge and one’s inner world.

Dharana is concentration, the sixth limb of yoga, and is the process of holding or fixing the attention of mind onto one object or place (*Yoga Sutra* 3.1). One withdraws from the senses and often makes use of a fixed gazing

point such as an image, candle flame, or visualization. In this context, the fourth limb of yoga of breathing serves as a preparatory withdrawal of the senses, in which the breath exercises can draw the focus inward.

Dhyana is meditation, which means sustained concentration, whereby the attention is held on the same object (3.2). The goal is to sit still and be quiet, with an empty mind. *Dhyana* is a continuous flow of perception or thought, like the flow of water in a river.

Samadhi, the eighth and final limb, is endless bliss, or unity with the object of focus. *Samadhi* is the deep absorption, wherein only the essence of that object, place, or point shines forth in the mind, as if the mind were devoid even of its own form (*Yoga Sutra* 3.3).

According to Shankara (d. 820), *samadhi* is when *dhyana* becomes the shining of the pure consciousness of the self or spirit, seemingly having become empty of its own nature—but only apparently so, for consciousness is the essential nature of all being—including God. It is the state when the meditator, object of meditation, and meditation have become one. In modern terms, through the process of meditation, consciousness comes into contact with universal Consciousness, where it tastes Supreme Bliss.

Patanjali breaks *samadhi* into two forms, super-consciousness and annihilation. Superconsciousness is where there is a unity of the triad of meditator, meditation, and the meditated, with the four qualities: reasoning, purity through deliberation, bliss (*ananda*), and sense of pure being (1:17). *Reasoning* in this context means the capacity for rational concepts to arise in a reflective or illuminating stream. Ordinary thinking is superseded and the yogi's intelligence functions as a manifestation of Pure Consciousness: God. *Purity through deliberation* concerns inner distractions and destroying the taints of ignorance, egoism, attraction toward and repulsion from objects, and fear of death. *Internal Bliss* is the state produced by meditation practice, which loosens the bonds of karma-bonds by the squelching of desire. *Pure Being* is the feeling of "I exist," the yogi comes to be absorbed in this awareness of simple being, of I-am-ness.

Still higher is the form where the mind and the ego-sense are completely annihilated (*asamprajnata*), the cessation of modifications in the mind-substance and an inhibition of all mental processes.

Raja Yoga

Vivekananda, the Hindu modernist, made Patanjani's *Yoga Sutras* a pillar of his public presentation of Hinduism, especially its chapters on meditation. ^[14] Vivekananda presents yogic meditation practice as scientific, centered on the control of the body with the mind, and the inner depth of every religion. He claimed that meditation allows one to gain control over every part of the body and even to gain control of the unconscious; a mind over matter. Vivekananda also argued that yogic meditation is the root of all the world's religions, taught by the founders of the world's faiths. Prophets may ascribe their inspiration to a *deva*, an angel, or God, but in reality the knowledge comes from the mind's own nature. As befitting the dawn of the twentieth century, Vivekananda taught that "these prophets were not unique" because they had gained superconsciousness. Rather, everyone can attain these states through meditation. For him, "*Samadhi* is the property of every human being—nay, every animal." ^[15]

Raja Yoga-Kurma Purana

As much as Vivekananda made the Patanjani's *Yoga Sutras* the basis of his theories, the actual basic anthology of many of his yogic meditation techniques comes from the *Kurma-Purana*. Vivekananda summarized selections from the *Kurma-Purana* in a free translation in his *Raja Yoga*. The *Kurma-Purana* is one of the eighteen major *Puranas*, a medieval era Vaishnavism text, that advocates burning negative traits to attain knowledge, and then the Lord is pleased. The work considers the absorptive bliss of the *Yoga Sutras* to be lower than the theistic great *Yoga Mahâyoga*, in which one attains bliss and oneness with God.

The work presents basic how-to information about meditation, such as sitting straight, and looking at the tip of your nose. It sets the measure of attention: if the mind can be fixed on the center for twelve seconds it will be a *dharana*, twelve such *dharanas* will be a *dhyana*, and twelve such *dhyanas*

will be a *samadhi*, which means that concentration becomes meditation after 144 seconds and absorption after twenty-eight minutes.

The meditations are varied. Here is one of them. Imagine a lotus upon the top of the head, several inches up, with virtue as its center, and knowledge as its stalk. Inside of that lotus, think of the Golden One, the Almighty, the Intangible, He whose name is Om, the Inexpressible, surrounded with effulgent light. Meditate on that. Meditate upon that in the heart. Chastity, non-injury, forgiving even the greatest enemy, truth, faith in the Lord.

Swami Shivananda

Swami Shivananda broke meditation down into steps and offered advice for the novice Westerner visiting an ashram; this advice included sitting still in a proper posture. He said, “Shut your eyes. Imagine that there is nothing but God everywhere.”^[16] He advises chanting “om” to get started as a means of driving away all worldly thoughts from the mind. Shivananda taught his disciples that meditation is doubtlessly difficult, so there must be graduated practices. Using a metaphor, he compares the process to the archer who first aims at large targets then attempts small bullseyes, so too the student of yoga should do gross concentration before subtle concentration practices.^[17]

Yet, Shivananda reminds his disciples that the ashram life of meditation and the work week are mutually contradictory. One cannot engage in meditation and office work at the same time daily. Therefore, yogic students will have to stop all worldly activities if they desire to advance further. In Shivananda’s time, meditation was an activity outside of society, not like today when meditation is claimed to be an ideal stress reliever for a busy work schedule.^[18]

All contemporary teachers of Hindu-influenced meditation techniques have read the classic medieval meditation sutras. Additionally, they have read the twentieth-century works on meditation of Vivekananda and Shivananda, and then formed their own versions.

Varieties of Hindu Meditation

There are many styles of Hindu meditation. A brief survey is in order.

Trataka (to look, or to gaze) is a yogic method of meditation that involves staring at a single point such as a small object, black dot, or candle flame. One looks intently with an unwavering gaze at a small point until tears are shed (*Hatha Yoga Pradipika* 2:31). A candle should be three to four feet away, the flame level with the eyes. Some authorities recommend that the eyes should then be closed, and that the yogi should concentrate on the after image, while others persevere with staring for 30–40 minutes.

The practitioner may fix his or her attention on a symbol or *yantra*, such as the Om symbol, the image of some deity or guru, a flame, a mirror or any point, and stare at it. There are many other equally effective symbols for *trataka* apart from the candle flame, such as a crystal ball, *yantra*, mandala, the full moon, or a star.

A mantra is a Vedic concept in which a word that is repeated, as a *japa*, for the purpose of focusing the mind. Some meditation teachers insist that both the choice of word, and its correct pronunciation, is very important, due to the vibration associated with the sound and meaning, and that for this reason an initiation into it is essential. Others say that the mantra itself is only a tool to focus the mind, and the chosen word is completely irrelevant. It usually consists of repeating sacred sounds, and names of God, including Om, *so-ham*, *om namah Shivaya*, *om mani padme hum*, and *rama*.

Transcendental Meditation (TM) is a specific form of Mantra Meditation introduced by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1955. TM involves the use of a mantra and is practiced twice a day for fifteen to twenty minutes each time while sitting with one's eyes closed. Western physicians have modified this approach as clinical meditation or stress relief meditation by removing the religious and Indian elements.

Tantra is a very rich tradition, with dozens of different contemplative practices of visualization, similar to kabbalistic intentions (see chapter on *tantra* below). The text *Vijnanabhairava Tantra*, for instance, lists 108 meditations. Here are some examples from that text: merge the mind and the senses in the interior space in the spiritual heart; when one object is perceived, all other objects become empty. Concentrate on that emptiness; concentrate on the space that occurs between two thoughts; fix attention on the inside of the skull. Close eyes; contemplate on the universe or one's own body as being filled with bliss.

Chakra Meditation is a tantric practice in which the practitioner focuses on one of the seven chakras of the body, typically by doing some visualizations and chanting a specific mantra for each chakra. Most commonly, it is done on the heart, the third eye, and the crown.

Kundalini Meditation harnesses the kundalini energy which lies dormant on the base of the spine, the development of several psychic centers in the body, and, finally, enlightenment.

Kriya Yoga is a set of energization, breathing, and meditation exercises taught by Paramahansa Yogananda that focuses around the six spinal centers (medullary, cervical, dorsal, lumbar, sacral, and coccygeal plexuses). Many gurus created their own variants such as Sadhguru, who created *Isha Kriya*, which is based on breathing and focusing on the spine and nostrils.

Self-Inquiry and “I Am” Meditation was developed by the twentieth-century Indian sage, Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950) Maharshi formulated a method of self-inquiry to “investigate” our true nature, to find the answer to the “Who am I?” question, which culminates with the intimate knowledge of our true self, our true being. With self-inquiry meditation, the question “Who I am?” is asked within yourself. You must reject any verbal answers that may come, and use this question simply as a tool to fix your attention in the subjective feeling of “I” or “I am.” This will then reveal your true “I,” your real self as pure consciousness, beyond all limitation. (For more on him, see chapter on gurus below.)

Judaism

Modern Jewry in its modernization of traditional life chose to follow the cerebral path of the academic study of Judaism, synagogue life, and ethnicity while Orthodox Judaism stressed ritual and textual study. In contrast, many Hindu modernists emphasize meditation and experiential *Advaita* over ritual, law, and textual study. However, what if a Jewish thinker would have started a movement a century ago to meditate based on the Jewish medieval classics? Proportionally, Judaism has as many meditative texts as Hinduism, but has relegated them to the past in its quest to be worldly and rational. Imagine if a Jewish author, someone like the polymath, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, had written his works on Jewish meditation in 1900 and, in turn, created dozens of schools of followers each mining the texts for

various techniques.^[19] Contemporary Judaism would have looked more like modern Hinduism spirituality.

An example of a Jewish *Trataka* practice is found in the writings of Rabbi Moshe deLeon (thirteenth century) which focuses on the inner divine lights and then uses it as a candle meditation. According to deLeon, there are four divine lights manifesting the unknown essence of the divine, allowing one to know the hidden recesses of the divine through the lower levels. He identifies this with prophecy. The passage describes what would be concentration (*dhyaya*), but without the absorption phase (*smadhi*).

- The four appearances of light are the radiant lights which are hidden and concealed. These come into being from the mysterious reality of [God's] essence, which is also hidden and concealed.
- There are four types of radiance (*Zohar*). They are Bahir light, *Zohar* light, Muvhak light, and light that receives *Zohar*. Physical light always receives from spiritual light.
- Thus, there are four different types of fire. . . . These are red fire, yellow fire, white fire, and black fire.
- Gaze at a candle. You will find the black light at the bottom, and the Bahir light at the top. But it is all one mystery and one light, and there is no separation whatsoever (*The Holy Coin*).^[20]

Rabbi Isaac of Accho's work, *Light of the Eyes* (c. 1280) presents rigorous meditative stages that progress from focusing the mind, to equanimity, to higher forms of meditation:

He who merits the secret of communion [with the divine] will merit the secret of equanimity (*hishtavvut*), and if he receives this secret, then he will also know the secret of meditation (*hitbodedut*), and once he has known the secret of meditation (*hitbodedut*), he will receive the holy spirit, and from that prophecy, until he shall prophesy and tell future things.

In explaining the mystery of equanimity, Rabbi Abner related the following account:

A Sage once came to one who practices meditation and asked that he be accepted into their society. The Other replied, "My son, blessed

are you to God. Your intentions are good. But tell me, have you attained equanimity or not?"

The Sage said, "Master, explain your words." The Meditator said, "If one man is praising you and another is insulting you, are the two equal in your eyes or not?" He replied, "No my master. I have pleasure from those who praise me, and pain from those who degrade me. But I do not take revenge or bear a grudge."

The Other said, "Go in peace my son. You have not attained equanimity. You have not reached a level where your soul does not feel praise of one who honors you, nor the degradation of one who insults you. You are not prepared for your thoughts to bound on high that you should come and meditate (*hitboded*). Go and increase humbleness of your heart and learn to treat everything equally until you have become tranquil. Only then will you be able to meditate."

And the cause of equanimity is the attachment of thoughts to God, for cleaving and attachment of the thought to God causes man to feel neither the honor nor the contempt that people show him. [\[21\]](#)

What of absorption (*smadhi*) in Kabbalah? The seminal kabbalist Rabbi Azriel of Gerona (thirteenth century) described the highest sefirah of the Kabbalah as "the annihilation of thought" (*afisat ha-mahashavah*), implying a meditative path through the contemplation of the *sefirot*. Yet, the analogy to yogic absorption is less applicable than one might think. Azriel of Gerona's approach is more a Neo-Platonic contemplation, a *unio mystica* of ascending into divine oneness than a Yogic meditative path in which one tunes out the senses and empties the mind.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (d. 1810) urged his followers to set aside a specific time each day to be alone with God, (*hitbodedut*) when they could speak to Him as if speaking with their best friend. Rebbe Nachman taught that the best place is in nature where the spiritually conducive atmosphere of nature opens up the heart and mind to the all-encompassing presence of God. This daily practice lasts for one hour per day and is highly emotional, encouraging song, prayer, tears, or laughter. Breslov Hasidism teaches a variety of practices called meditation but they are clearly *bhakti*-oriented or *japa*. [\[22\]](#)

NOTES

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Chapter 4

Denominations

PERIODS OF HISTORY

We already dealt with the early archeological period of the Vedas in a prior chapter. In this chapter, we look at the three periods in which Hindu practice was formed, the classical, the Golden Age of the Gupta period, and the late classical era.

Classical Period

During the formative period of Hinduism (c. 200 BCE–300 CE), was when the grand theistic Hindu synthesis occurred bringing together Brahminical Vedic religion with many other Indian religions, each focused on one of the Hindu pantheon of gods. The formative period of classical Hinduism occurred during the same time as the formation of Rabbinic Judaism.

During this era, the major Sanskrit epics were recorded, consisting of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. The *Bhagavad Gita* is an integral part of the Mahabharata and one of the most popular sacred texts of Hinduism. Also, the *Dharma shastras*, even if their final editing was in the following Golden Age. These works are the Smriti, considered “that which has been remembered” supplementary as an oral law applied to the age, as opposed to the eternal Shruti, considered “that which has been heard” and is canonical, revelation. The *Agamas* literature, most of which has still not been translated contains most of the ritual practices that focus on rites of passage, worship of an image, and daily worship. It was also the period of the formulation of the several schools of Hindu philosophy.

Gupta Period—Golden Age

During the Golden Age (Gupta Empire) (c. 320–650 CE), The first Hindu temples dedicated to the new Hindu deities emerged and the first *Puranas*

were written. The religion of the Vedas focusing on sacrifice gave way to temple worship, devotion to the gods, and home worship. The order of gods, angels, heroes, and emanations was still not fixed but evolving into a hierarchy.

The Gupta period witnessed the building of many temples, in that, temple building came to be closely allied with political power. The costly and magnificently carved south Indian temples were monuments not just to the devotion, but also the reign and affiliation of the rulers. During this period, there was competition between various nascent versions of Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Buddhism, and Jainism for the support of the rulers.

Late-Classical Hinduism

The era of late-classical Hinduism-Puranic Hinduism (c. 650–1100 CE) witnessed when power became decentralized in India. The disintegration of central power also led to regionalization of religiosity, where rural and devotional movements arose within Hinduism, the Agamic and Puranic works were circulated and *bhakti* became mainstream. During this period, we have the formulation of the entities that still make up twenty-first-century Hinduism—Shaivism, Vaishnavism, *bhakti*, and *tantra*. Since most Americans are not acquainted with the huge Agamic literature, which has the principles of Hindu worship and Hindu denominations, the sects and denominations are generally overlooked. It was also the era of debates between the non-dualistic *Advaita Vedanta*, which was formulated by Adi Shankara, and the dualistic version formulated by Ramanuja.

Denominations

By the end of the late classical period, Hinduism had four major denominations: Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktas, and Smarta. Shaivism focuses on the worship of ancient high deity Shiva. However, Shiva worship is varied enough to include the aniconic monotheistic Lingayat as well as wild ascetics. Vaishnavas, the largest denomination, focuses on Vishnu and his incarnations (*avatara*). They believe that God incarnates into the world in different forms such as Krishna and Rama in order to restore *dharma*. Shaktas focus on the goddess in her gentle forms such as Lakshmi, Parvati,

and Saraswati, or in her ferocious forms such as Durga and Kali. They usually show a nearness to Sivism in theological points but accept tantric forms of worship. The smallest denomination is Smarta, which focuses on *Brahman*, but in daily worship one could worship any one of five deities (Vishnu, Shiva, Durga, *Surya*, Ganesa) as one's *istadevata* (deity of choice). Depending on the household, one of these deities is kept in the center and the other four surround it, yet worship is offered to all the deities. In modern times, Smarta views have been highly influential via Neo-*Vedanta*. For Smarta, "There is no likeness of Him" (Svetasvatara Upanishad 4:19).

Currently, Vaishnavism and Shaivism make up 96 percent of Hindus, even if much of the interfaith discussion with Jews is the Smartas. (With Christians, the Vaishnavite are most active in interfaith.) Regional differences with Hinduism are huge compared to Christianity and Islam with great variance in the practice of the various linguistic ethnic regions in which Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Nepali, Punjabi, Tamil, and many more each have separate ways of keeping the *dharma* or celebrating festivals. These diverse groups started to see commonality between themselves in the Middle Ages, which increased into a common destiny after the seventeenth century. Yet, as late of the eighteenth century, we still have accounts of public fights and theological polemics between groups about correct worship.

During the medieval and early modern periods (1206–1858) the country had several waves of Muslim conquests, mainly in Northern India, while Southern India had the Hindu Vijayanagara Empire. Because the Southern region was always in Hindu possession, the ancient temples are better preserved and there are greater numbers of ancient Hindu practices preserved in the South.

SHAIVISM

Shaivism presents itself as the world's oldest religion; the roots of Shiva worship date back to the advanced Indus Valley Civilization 8,000 years ago. Many aspects of this religion are Dravidian, pre-dating any Aryan or Vedic understandings. Historians date the formation of the present-day Shaivism to between 200 BCE to 100 CE, and believe it became a fully recognized branch of Hinduism during the early Gupta period (c. 320 CE). This corresponds roughly to the same era as the rabbinic scribes. Shaivism is the

second largest branch of Hinduism and has 198 million adherents worldwide.^[1]

Shiva Worship

Shaivites worship Shiva as the central deity, in a combination of dualistic monotheism, monism, and qualified monism of panentheism, so it resembles a combination of rabbinic and mystical Judaism.

Shaivites portray Shiva as the Compassionate One who is present everywhere and offers grace or liberation to those who serve him. The ninth-century Tamil poet, Manikkavachakar, proclaimed: “The Lord is one. He is the supreme of all existences and pervades all. . . . He is kindness and love. His kindness is bestowed upon the suffering souls through the medium of His grace.”^[2] Shiva is the ultimate reality endowed with omniscience, omnipotence, independence, benevolence, blissfulness, and purity. Shaivites believe that Lord Shiva performs five actions—creation, preservation, dissolution, concealing grace, and revealing grace.

Shaivism sees Shiva as a personal god who is neither male nor female, both immanent and transcendent, and pleased by human purity and spiritual practice. Unlike Vaishnavism, there are no incarnations or *avatars*, and no embodied divine corporeality. In practice, the gods of the incarnations are accepted by all, but not as official theology. Shaivism does not encourage worship of minor deities; in theory, any benefit derived from worshipping them is only a temporary psychological benefit that will hinder spiritual progress. However, in practice, the worship of Ganesh and others is widespread.

Shivism’s most important mantra is *Om Namah Shivaya*. Its translation is “adoration (namas) to Shiva,” preceded by the mystical syllable “Aum.” The mantra is associated with qualities of grace, truth, and blissfulness. In order for Shaivites to spiritually progress and earn Shiva’s grace, Shaivism encourages its practitioners to develop good qualities, such as love for all beings, and to imitate Lord Shiva, who is the personification of wisdom, love, and all good qualities. Here is a theistic hymn to Shiva as lord of heaven and earth as well as a personal god, which is sung at dawn.

The Lord is beyond all laws of heaven and earth but at the same time he is very near

O God Shiva, O remover of all problems, O personification of truth,
O all knower, O holy god who lives in every one's heart,
O God who blesses with all types of wealth, O friend of people devoted to you,
A lustrous good morning to you, O my Lord of the universe. [\[3\]](#)

Shaivism uses rational proofs for the existence of God found in *Nyaya*. From a Jewish perspective, much of Shaivism, with its single deity, is not far from Western faiths. There are differences between Judaism and Shaivism. The infinite Shiva has a consort, Shakti, who is not considered a separate god from Shiva. One could compare Shakti to the various realms of medieval Jewish thought—the *kavod*, *Shekhinah*, or the *sefirot* (see the chapter on emanations below; Christian comparative works treat Shakti as the Logos).

Blessings are personified by separate *devas*, such as Ganesha or Parvati. They represent divine blessings, divine providence, the gift of wisdom, and the gift of children. Everyone, from the storekeepers in town selling the clay icons of the *devas* to the people on campus, was quick to remind me that Shaivites do not refer to these clay images as separate gods, because that would take away from the single worship of Shiva. Rather, they are *devas*, anthropomorphised powers—(a term medieval Jews translated as angels).

Shaivites often pray to Ganesha for worldly things and only pray to Shiva for worship and asking for spiritual insight, help, and advancement. Thus, they might ask Ganesha for help in preparing for and taking an exam, but ask Shiva to help us see our true spiritual nature—unlike the Smartism practitioners, who explain these *devas* as forms of an Absolute above all forms.

The final, and for many, the main distinction is the extensive use of images—which is always forbidden in Jewish thought and practice.

Shiva is formless in his inherent form. However, he is manifested in three ways: form without a body, form with body, and form both with and without body.

The first category, bodiless form of Shiva is described in Shaiva texts as the highest aspect of reality, as a stainless void, and as the innate nature behind all realities.

The second category, bodily manifestation, is usually a pictured image, which is a visual and symbolic representation. In the classic depiction of Shiva, he is seated on Nandi, his bull mount, the perfect devotee. Lord Shiva holds *japa* beads and the trident, the symbol of love-wisdom-action, and

offers blessings of protection and fearlessness. Mount Kailas, his sacred Himalayan abode, represents the pinnacle of consciousness. Shiva has a crescent moon on his head. He is said to be fair, like camphor or like an ice-clad mountain. He wears five serpents and a garland of skulls as ornaments. His trident symbolizes the unity of the three worlds that a human faces—his inside world, his immediate world, and the broader overall world.

Shiva is depicted with a third eye that he used to burn desire to ashes. When Shiva loses his temper, his third eye opens, reducing most things to ashes. Shiva smears his body with ashes that represent the end of all material existence.

The third category—representation both with and without a body—is the image of Shivalingam. Here, Shiva is most commonly worshipped in the form of a *linga* (Sanskrit for symbol), which is often misinterpreted. Basically, it is a natural stone or natural pillar. Hindu temples in the West use beautiful natural formations of crystals and boulders, and many Hindus use an oval or egg shaped polished stone or painted oval figure. From a biblical perspective, it is a pillar like those used in Genesis and later forbidden to Jews in Deuteronomy.

The *Linga Purana*, one of the major eighteen *Puranas*, directly conveys the importance of worship of *linga* and the correct rituals to follow. It describes Shiva as unmanifest without color, taste, or smell, beyond word and touch, without quality, changeless, motionless. Shiva, however, can be perceived only through his creation, which is his sign or *linga*. The unmanifest is known and worshiped only through this sign. The work explicitly states that all other deities are part of the manifest multiplicity of the world and thus can be worshiped as images.

Many *lingas*, which are the main object of worship in Shaivite temples, are phallic symbols. They represent the generative and creative power of existence. The *linga* is a simple stylized phallus that nearly always rests on a pedestal of a stylized yoni, or female sex organ. Together, the *linga* and yoni represent the power of creative energy and fertility. During the Gupta period, this image became stylized, so in later periods its original phallic realism was mostly lost. There are precise rules of proportion to be followed for the height, width, and curvature of the top.

Variations include the mukhalinga, with one to five faces of Shiva carved on its sides and top, and the lingodbhavamurti, a south Indian form

that shows Shiva emerging out of a fiery superiority over Vishnu and Brahma. Some *lingas* are topped with a cobra, symbolizing the kundalini chakra, located at the base of the spine.

Another image of Shiva is the Nataraja, the multi-armed cosmic Dance of Shiva; this is probably the most iconic image of Hinduism in the West. This image pictures Shiva in the dance of creation, preservation, and destruction. In this multi-armed form, Shiva holds a drum in one hand, representing creation, and the fire of destruction in another. One of his right arms is in the gesture meaning no fear, signaling preservation. He holds another arm pointing to his feet so that people can take refuge there. Another arm is held in an elephant trunk like posture, alluding to Ganesha, the remover of obstacles, again showing help and preservation to all people. The dancing Shiva is expressive of the highly evolved arts and culture. While these artistic images of Shiva are extensive and have been richly presented to the West by philosopher Ananda Coomaraswamy, they are not generally used in temple worship as a main image.

Types of Shaivism

Even within this one denomination of Shaivism, there are many subdivisions with major theological distinctions. I will present four: Lingayats who do not use images or accept reincarnation; Saiva Siddhanta who want God to free their souls; Kashmir Shaivism, which is a mystical monism; and the Ascetic Shaivism.

Lingayats (Also Known as Virashaivas)

Lingayatism, established in the twelfth century by social reformer Basavanna, departs from the perceived mainstream Hinduism in several ways. It preaches monotheism, avoids images, and only worships Lord Shiva in the form of *linga*. Its members must wear an Ishtalinga, an oval-shaped emblem symbolizing the absolute reality, hung by a cord around the believer's neck. (These oval stones were sold in the campus bookstore.)

They also bury the dead, rather than cremating them. They reject much of Hinduism including the Vedas' authority, the concept of Brahmins and temple worship, the caste system, and beliefs such as reincarnation and

karma. They are one of the groups that are Hindu but not Vedic; some literature treats them as their own religion. (Currently, many of them are seeking recognition as a separate religion than Hinduism.)

Saiva Siddhanta

The Saiva Siddhanta School is one of the most mainstream and ancient schools of Shaivism, and it is currently most popular in the south. For many Saivaites, this school is the essence of Hinduism.

The three fundamental elements of Saiva Siddhanta are the God, the soul, and the bonds of existence, called *pati*, *pasu*, and *pasam*. *Pati* means Lord (of the souls), who is God. *Pasam* means bondage of the soul. *Pasu* means that which is under bondage. All things known and perceived are included in these three categories. According to Saiva Siddhanta, God is one, souls are many. No two persons or beings are alike; every living being has a personal soul of its own.

Shiva, as *pati*, is the ultimate and supreme reality; he is omniscient, omnipresent, and unbound. Shiva alone is the efficient cause of all creation, evolution, preservation, concealment, and dissolution. He brings forth the worlds and their beings through his dynamic power, Shakti.

The soul as *pasu* is lost in bondage as *pasum*, which consists of three impurities called Anava (the finite self), Karma (prior actions), and Maya (the illusions of the world). The finite self's bonds (anavam) cause all of the soul's inherent negative qualities, including ego, ignorance, and hatred. Anavam, like tarnish on copper or the husk on wheat, is naturally associated with the soul. Anavam is unique to Saiva Siddhanta.

Karma, or binding action, is the second impurity. It binds the soul to the consequences of its actions. Selfless actions do not bind the soul to the world, but actions done with an egoistic attitude, driven by one's desires, do.

Maya, the third impurity, binds the souls (*jivas*) to the sense objects through desires and ignorance. It is the first cause of all material things. It is real, and not an illusion (as it is in *Vedanta* philosophy). Material objects, created from maya, are needed to perform any action in the world. God creates from maya, as a potter makes with clay. The physical body is made from maya and is bound to the soul. Maya's purpose is two-fold. First, maya

subjects the souls (*jivas*) to the conditions of material existence and helps them acquire sensory knowledge and material knowledge. Secondly, maya prepares souls for final liberation by subjecting them to the laws of karma and helping them discriminate between right actions and wrong actions so that they can gain merit by doing right actions and avoiding wrong actions.

Souls have to spend many lives before they feel the need to work for their liberation. The difference between this theology and Judaism is that Rabbinic Judaism does not consider the world to be bondage. Both selfless and self-interested inclinations are needed. All is not selfless and free of desire, in that, without it, a human being would never marry, beget children, build a house, or engage in trade (Gen. Rabbah 9:7). Desire only causes harm when it is out of control. An effective antidote is the study and observance of Torah (cf. Kiddushin 30b).

Obligations and Liberation

In this life of maya, the soul evolves through karma and reincarnation from the instinctive-intellectual sphere into virtuous and moral living, then into temple worship and devotion, followed by internalized worship, or yoga, and its meditative disciplines. The union with God comes through the grace of the teacher as *satguru* and culminates in the soul's maturity in the state of *jnana*, or wisdom. In contrast, most Vaishnavites believe that religion is the performance of *bhakti*.

In Saiva Siddhanta, true liberation is a gift from God and the result of His direct intervention. The soul learns true and false through maya, theoretical knowledge or lower knowledge. In every birth, the soul gains experience through its actions, and through experience gains knowledge that makes it worthy for Lord Shiva to bestow his grace upon it.

Liberation is made in four progressive stages of belief and practice called *charya*, *kriya*, *yoga*, and *jnana*. The stage of *charya* involves serving Shiva by performing tasks in a temple, religious place, or day to day tasks. The stage of *kriya* involves performing devotional tasks such as

worshipping Shiva, singing devotional songs, reciting the mantras, narrating stories about Shiva, or doing personal service to Shiva like a son does for his father. The stage of yoga involves practicing yoga exercises (*asanas*) and meditation and contemplation (*dhyana*), allowing one to live constantly in the company of Shiva and to become his spiritual companion. The stage of knowledge is the fourth path, considered the most direct path allowing one to become aware of her true Shiva consciousness.

After liberation, the liberated soul knows that its intrinsic nature is that of Shiva but that it is not Shiva or the Supreme Self. Thus, in its liberated state, the soul continues to experience some form of duality, while enjoying Shiva's (*pati*) consciousness as its true consciousness, free from all bonds (*pasas*).

While Judaism spends most of its efforts on the two lower paths, Maimonides, Kabbalah, and parts of Hasidut focus on the higher two paths. In Shaivism, the soul needs to perfect itself and then it merits liberation. In contrast, rabbinic texts allow greater moral latitude and laxity because the Jewish God in rabbinic literature is ever patient, grants atonement, is ever forgiving, long-suffering, and even takes bribes. The Maimonidean world-to-come based on earned knowledge and conjunction with the divine is closer to Hinduism.

Canon: Tirumurai

There are extensive Shaivite *Agamas* (ritual volumes analogous to the Talmud) of twenty-eight volumes, providing instructions for the worship of Shiva. Their principal collections of sacred narrative about Shiva are the *Shiva Purana*, the *Linga Purana*, the *Skanda Purana*, the *Svetasvatara Upanishad* (which is the foundational Vedic text of Shaivism), the *Ishvara Gita* and *Shiva Gita*.

Nandinatha (c. 250 BC) was the Saiva Siddhanta tradition's first-known guru. His theology is studied through the Tirumurai (eleventh century), a twelve-volume collection of Tamil theological poems which contains the

Tirumandiram (fifth century), the ninth-century Tiruvasagam by Manikkavacakar, and the tenth-century Tevaram (by the sixth to eighth century, devotional saints such as Appar, Sundarar, Sambandhar). This group of saints—sixty-three in total, called the Nayanars—made Shaivism a popular movement by moving from place to place and temple to temple, singing Shiva’s glory. The lives of these Saiva saints were recorded in the Periyapuram and the Umapati’s fourteenth-century *Shivaprakasham* (Lights on Shiva). Many Shaivites emphasize these later works and downplay the importance of the Vedic canon; reading selections from this Tamil Shaivite literature is essential to understanding Shaivism.^[4]

Kashmir Shaivism

Kashmir Shaivism is a group of non-dualist Tantric Shaiva traditions from Kashmir, which originated in the second half of the first millennium. The term most frequently refers to the Anuttaratrikakula (the school of the highest Trika or Triad) philosophy also known as the Pratyabhijna (recognition) system expounded by Abhinavagupta (c. 975–1025 CE), but also includes the earlier schools.^[5]

Non-dualist Kashmir Shaivism went underground for a number of centuries after the fourteenth century. In the twentieth century, Swami Lakshman Joo—himself a Kashmiri Brahmin—helped revive both the scholarly and yogic streams of Kashmir Shaivism, and his disciples brought it to Varanasi.

The philosophy of Kashmir Shaivism’s central thesis is that everything is absolute consciousness as Shiva and Shakti, to recognize this fundamental reality mirrored in one’s own *atman* and be freed from limitations, and thereby become immersed in bliss. The goal is the recognition of one’s already existing identity with the union of Shiva and Shakti, as Universal Consciousness. Kashmir Shaivism claimed to supersede Shiva Siddhanta with its dualistic tradition concerned with attaining Shiva’s grace.

There are three essential realities: the Supreme Transcendent of Shiva, the Supreme Creative Energy, which is immanent in creation as Shakti, and the human self. Thus, the slave (*pasu*—the human condition) becomes the master (*pati*—the divine condition), a self-realization that God is within

one's own soul. Kashmir Shaivites believe that all reality, including Shiva and Shakti, is mirrored in the human soul and that recognizing this image is the means of liberation. A person is consciousness that is identical with Shiva.

Kashmir Shaivism differs from *Advaita* in that Kashmir Shaivism teaches that God has volition and that reality and maya are real, while *Advaita Vedanta* holds that *Brahman* is inactive and that the phenomenal world is an illusion.

Intellectuals are attracted to this philosophy because the divine is immanent in oneself and humans are identified with God. Currently, several Israeli academic scholars of Hasidim are looking into the similarities with Hasidic monism as found in Rabbi DovBer (the Mitteler Rebbe) or Rabbi Zadok Hakohen of Lublin (d. 1900).

Shaivite Asceticism

Shaivism has long been connected with rigorous asceticism; many, if not most, yogis, ashrams, and holy men are Shaivites. They identify with Shiva as the great destroyer who is above the categories of earthly existence and live a life beyond the categories of life and death. Ascetic forms of Shaivism are almost the opposite of the Saiva Siddhanta form where good deeds and knowledge lead to liberation. Ascetics live to show that they are already above the world.

In Hinduism, a sadhu, is a religious ascetic, or a *sanyasi* (renunciate) who has left behind all material attachments and lives in caves, forests, and temples. Today, India has between four and five million *sadhus*. Indian culture tends to emphasize an infinite number of paths to God, so *sadhus*, who continue many varieties of Hinduism, are widely respected for their holiness.

One specific visible fringe group, the Aghori engage in post-mortem rituals. They often dwell in charnel grounds, have been witnessed smearing cremation ashes on their bodies, and have been known to use bones from human corpses for crafting skull bowls (which Shiva and other Hindu deities are often iconically depicted holding or using) and jewelry. Since their practices are contradictory to Orthodox Hinduism, they are generally opposed when they deliberately contravene moral norms. The *sadhus* contribute to the colorful folk religion and memorable street life of a

Shaivism event, especially the naked ascetic Nagas who orchestrate major recruiting events.

VAISHNAVISM

Vaishnavism is the largest denomination of Hinduism. Seventy percent of Hindus are Vaishnavites and 26 percent are Shaivites; all other forms combined are only 4 percent.

Vaishnava Worship

Vaishnavism is a theistic faith focused on the veneration of Vishnu as the Supreme God who is identified with *Brahman*, and manifested in many *avatars*, *guna-avatars*, and *devas*. Vaishnavites worship a single, theistic God, along with the goddess Lakshmi. ^[6]

Vaishnavism absorbed all similar and related theistic cults and religions in India during the period between 200 BCE to 300 CE. Bhagavatism, Vasudevaism, Vaikhanasa, Ramaism, and Krishnaism, which were originally, separate cults, merged into historical Vishnuism. This unification resembled a large merger, where all of the practitioners of similar cults acknowledged that they were branches of one faith, but retained their own images and names. The *avatars* originated from these separate cults before the Common Era; the most important cults belong to Rama and Krishna, the epics' heroes.

Vaishnavism claims Vedic roots in the Purusha hymn of the *Rig Veda* (X.90) and in the *Katha*, *Mahanarayana* and *Taittiriya Upanishads*. It has several qualities that distinguish it from Shaivism.

1. Vaishnavism incorporates the rich epic traditions of the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and the *Bhagavad Gita* with their synthesis of narrative, morals, devotion, and discipleship. They are the cultural heritage of all Hindus, including Shaivites, but the richness holds a greater place for Vaishnavas.
2. It also has a vast number of Agamic and Puranic books including the *Lakshmi Tantra*, the *Bhagavata Purana*, and the *Pancaratra*. The variation in thought and practice in these works creates a

corresponding diversity in Vaishnavism. The commentaries on these works further this diversity.

3. It developed the Agamic literature delineating temple and home worship and the images of the *avatars* of the gods. Ancient Vedic religion had no worship of images.
4. It had sophisticated theologians like Ramanuja, Madhva, Nimbarka, Vallabha, Vedanta Desika, Manavala Mamunigal, who each created fully synthetic works of theology and practice that serve a basis for thought and practice. All laity, communities, and temples follow one of these thinkers as their inspiration, in which, they establish the correct rites and theology for most worship sites and rituals. Do not assume that theistic philosophy was only for a few.
5. Vaishnavism is devotional; it has many saints, temples, and scriptures. There are twelve special saints, the Alvars, who developed *bhakti* through poetry, song, and story giving Vaishnavism has a popular devotional approach to God.
6. It has a vast local canon beyond the Vedas that not only accepts the later Agamic literature but even canonizes the vernacular written Tamil literature of the Alvars.

Vishnu

The name Vishnu means the All-Pervading One. Maha-Vishnu, equated with *Brahman*, is the aspect of Vishnu as the Almighty Absolute Supreme Personality of Godhead, and the Supersoul of all living beings (*jivaatmas*) in all material universes, beyond human comprehension. Vishnu is beyond all attributes.

The divinity of Absolute Truth is realized first as impersonal *Brahman*, then as a personal Paramatma, and finally manifest, as Bhagavan. Though Vishnu's auspicious qualities are countless, his six most-important divine glories are: omniscience, sovereignty, *shakti* (power or energy), the capacity to support everything by will, vigour, and splendor. Other important qualities of Vishnu include: inestimable grandeur, generosity, and compassion. All of these attributes are recognizable to a Jewish theist, especially the qualities in the Jewish liturgy of the silent *Amidah* portraying God as great, mighty, awesome, as well as the kabbalistic addition of

netzach and hod, vigor (*netzah*) and splendor (*hod*).

Many works represent Vishnu as an ideal divinity who delights in moral goodness and ritualistic purity. Vishnu incarnates from time to time in human or animal form in order to maintain the standard of righteousness.

Absolute God: Narayana

Narayana is one of the names given to the personal aspect of Vishnu, the almighty, and omnipotent. Believers beseech Narayana in worship as the Para *Brahman*, Absolute Divine. Narayana is the name of God in his infinite all-pervading form. Narayana Himself sustains, maintains, and preserves the universe as Vishnu and annihilates the universe at the end of time. The *Bhagavad Gita* describes Narayana as having a universal form, which is beyond the ordinary limits of human perception or imagination. Narayana has all the attributes and qualities of a theistic God in Western theology.

Avataras

Vishnu has many *avataras*. They descend for the very specific purpose of bringing *dharma*, or righteousness, back to the social and cosmic order. An oft-quoted passage from the *Bhagavad Gita* states: “Whenever righteousness wanes and unrighteousness increases I send myself forth.” (*Gita*: 4.7–8). The *avataras* destroy evil and reestablish righteousness.

The *Bhagavata Purana* describes Vishnu’s *avataras* as innumerable, though the *Garuda Purana* (1.86.10) lists ten incarnations that are widely seen as his major appearances. Krishna and Rama are the two main *avataras* in the two epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Krishna is the king of Dwarka, a central character in the *Bhagavata Purana* and the Mahabharata, and the reciter of *Bhagavad Gita* (see the discussion earlier in this chapter).

There are two types of *avatars*: primary or direct *avatars*, and indirect *avatars*. Rama and Krishna are primary *avatars*, but Vishnu is partially also manifested in animal *avatars* like the tortoise or the lion. The indirect *avatars* are generally not worshipped as the Supreme Being. That said, all Hindus believe that there is no difference between worship of Vishnu and his *avatars* since it all leads to Him.

Rama

Rama, the seventh *avatara* of the Hindu god Vishnu, is the oldest known god with human form. He is the king of Ayodhya and the protagonist of the epic Ramayana. In a few Rama-centric groups, he is the Supreme Being, rather than an *avatara*.

Rama, depicted as the ideal man in the Ramayana epic, is an example of adherence to *dharma* despite harsh tests and obstacles and many pains of life and time. To preserve his father's honor, Rama abandons his claim to his throne to serve an exile of fourteen years in the forest. His wife, Sita, and brother, Lakshmana, join him for all fourteen years. While in exile, Sita is kidnapped by Ravana, the monarch of Lanka. After a long and arduous search, Rama fights a colossal war against Ravana's armies. After a war between powerful and magical beings with greatly destructive weaponry and battles, Rama slays Ravana in battle and liberates his wife. Having completed his exile, Rama returns to be crowned king in Ayodhya. He eventually becomes emperor, and rules with happiness, peace, duty, prosperity, and justice. Throughout the epic, there are speeches and dialogues about duty, ethics, and values.

Many Northern Indian festivals celebrate Rama, such as Rama Navami on the ninth day of a Hindu lunar year, as the marriage day of Rama and Sita as well as the birthday of Rama. Vijayadashmi is the occasion of victory over Ravana. Diwali, also known as the festival of lights, is Rama's return and coronation in Ayodhya. Rama Nawami celebrates the birth of the god Rama to King Dasharatha and Queen Kausalya in Ayodhya.

Sri Vaishnava Theology

Today's Vishnu worshippers—who have a wide spectrum of traditions—generally follow the system of Pancharatra worship, its theory of *avataras*, and its theology. The prefix Sri, referring to Lakshmi, is used for this sect because they give special importance to the worship of the goddess Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu. Most Sri Vaishnava theology sees Lakshmi as the public side of Vishnu, offering grace to humanity.

Pancharatra has six core teachings that focus on surrender to God: i) placing oneself completely and directly under God's care; (ii) absolute humility; (iii) great faith with the understanding that God is the benefactor of all beings, and His compassion is always and readily available; (iv) The acceptance of God as the sole protector; (v) recognizing that all beings are like Himself and respect any of His creations or to Him; and (vi) realizing that all beings are in actuality the body of God. The first five core teachings are similar to the Jewish pietistic literature and the sixth is found in Moses Cordovero's piety.

When one gives oneself up to God, one should consider it like a passenger who wants to cross a river in a boat, the passenger's responsibility is only to sit in the boat, and that is the end of his responsibility; the job of rowing the boat is not his, but that of the boatman, in this case God Himself.

Ramanuja

During the eleventh century AD, Ramanuja, a founder of Sri Vaishnava traditions of Vaisnavism, established the Pancharatra system of Vaishnavism and Narayana worship for his followers and wrote his refutation of the philosophy of Adi Sankara. Ramanuja's philosophy is theistic—it affirms a morally perfect, omniscient and omnipotent God. It is also realistic—it affirms the existence and reality of a plurality of qualities, persons, and objects. Ramanuja's thought is Vishisht-*advaita*, a qualified monism, in which the personal God of worship is identified with the *Brahman*, or Absolute Reality.

As a personal God, *Brahman* possesses all the good qualities in a

perfect degree. The relationship between the infinite and the finite is like that between the soul and the body. Hence, non-duality means that the infinite is non-dual while still articulating finite differences. The human soul and physical matter are totally dependent on God for their existence, like the body is on the soul. God has two modes of being: cause and product. As cause, He is in His essence qualified only by his perfections; as product, He has as His body the souls and the phenomenal world. There is a pulsating rhythm in these periods of creation and absorption. For Ramanuja, release from the world is the joy of the contemplation of God, attained by a life of exclusive devotion to God and personal worship.

Two and Three Sects

During his lifetime, Ramanuja had appointed seventy-four organizations to propagate Sri Vaishnavism. Among the Brahmins, the main groups are the Iyengars, who further divided into the Vadakalai (the northern school) and Thenkalai (southern school) two hundred years later. Both schools adhere to the Pancaratra *Agama* in temples. These two sects differ on eighteen points of doctrine. Swami Vedanta Desika founded the Vadakalai sect, and Manavala Mamuni founded the Thenkalai sect.

The Vadakalais, the much larger group, consider Vedanta Desika to be the greatest teacher of the post Ramanuja era. They prefer Sanskrit to vernacular compositions, but they will use the Tamil *Divyaprabandham* in temple worship, and are usually stricter about Brahminical and Sanskritic norms. Typically, they retain Vedic orthodoxy regarding modes of worship and usage of Vedic verses. They prefer the Vedic practices that focus on the propitiation of Vishnu through fire rituals (*yajna* and *homa*) to the worship of icons in temples. The Thenkalai have a more liberal standpoint regarding caste, making it appropriate for popular *bhakti*.

A third group are the Vaikhanasas. They are primarily an ancient community of temple priests who use the Vaikhanasa *Agama* in temple worship. They use Sanskrit exclusively in temple worship, they do not follow

the Pancaratra *Agama*, and they do not have shrines to the humans, such as Alvars or Ramanuja, inside their temples.

Tirumalai in Tirupati is the purest example of a Vaikhanasa temple we have today (see the discussion of Tirumalai below). Vaikhanasa Vaishnavas are not formally affiliated with the ritual tradition of Ramanuja, only his theology. The Vaikhanasa Vaishnavas are strictly hereditary—one must be born (or adopted) into a Vaikhanasa family to be a Vaikhanasa.

Other Teachers

Vaishnavites are conscious of their division into Sampradaya religious systems or denominations. These systems have a succession of masters and disciples, which serves as a spiritual channel, and provides a delicate network of relationships that stabilize a religious identity. In addition to the aforementioned Ramanuja, here are some others. [\[7\]](#)

Madhva (1199–1278) advocated *dvaita*—a non-unity dualistic—interpretation of *Vedanta* and he identified God with Vishnu. His view of reality is dualistic, in that he understood a fundamental differentiation between the ultimate Godhead and the individual soul. His influence on the Vaishnava *bhakti* movement was profound; he preached that through *bhakti*, devotion to God, one could eliminate their karma and return to their position in the spiritual world. The Lord is the ultimate cause of the creation, maintenance, and annihilation of the material manifestation. Thus, the Lord is completely independent, while the living entities are completely dependent on the Lord.

Vallabha (1479–1531) approached *Vedanta* as *Advaita*—pure non-dualism. According to him, it is by God’s grace alone that one can obtain release from bondage and attain Krishna’s heaven. This heaven is far above the heavens of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, for Krishna is the eternal *Brahman*. *Bhagavata Purana* is the essence of all spiritual and devotional knowledge. He established that Krishna was the supreme form of God, and that the soul is not merely a part of God’s energy, but is qualitatively the same as God, but small in potency.

There are other approaches, including that of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486–1534), who defined his system of philosophy as *Achintya Bheda*

Abheda (inconceivable and simultaneous oneness and difference). It synthesizes elements of monism and dualism into a single system (see the next chapter).

In temple worship, a Vaikhanasa temple (like Tirumala), a Madhva temple (like Udupi), a Tengalai temple (like Melukote) and a Vadagalai temple (like Thiruvallur) all have distinctly different rituals and customs with specific priests of that particular denomination who perform the distinctive worship. However, all Vaishnavite lay worshippers visit all temples.

In theology, Tengalai see God as taking care of everything the way a cat carries its young without their young having to do anything, while the Vadagalai see God as expecting us to do our share in our connection to God, the way a baby monkey has to hold onto his mother.

Even though the average person does not know the theological complexity between the groups, the average non-scholarly Vaishnavite should be looked at no differently than the non-scholar at a synagogue who may not know scholarly theology but certainly knows the differences between Hasid, Mitnaged, Maimonidean, or kabbalist practices and who knows that the synagogue practice reflects theology.

Vaishnava Brahmins are generally vegetarian. Among the non-Brahmins, many of the groups tend to be vegetarians like the Brahmins.

The *Bhagavata Purana*

The *Bhagavata Purana*, also known as *Shrimad Bhagavatam* or *Bhagavata*, is one of the central works of Vaishnavites. It not only includes many of Hinduism's well-known stories, but it also has a presentation of theology, the *avatars*, festivals, and chants.^[8] The Bhagavata philosophy is *Vedantic* Theism; it combines the seemingly contradictory beliefs of a personal God with a God that is immanent in creation and in one's own self. The book oscillates between the merging of the individual soul with the Absolute *Brahman*, in which there is the return of *Brahman* into His own true nature, and devotional love and worship of Bhagavan as the object of concentration for reaching that goal.

Alvars

The Alvars (those immersed in god) were Tamil poet-saints of South India who lived between the fifth to tenth century CE (popular Orthodoxy sees them as primordial ancients living 4200 BCE–2700 BCE). All of the Alvars espoused *bhakti* (devotion) to Vishnu in their songs of longing, ecstasy and service, love songs to God that embodied both depth of feeling and felicity of expressions. They give Vaishnavism its characteristic personality and its practice of lay devotion, love of God, and artistic performance.

Judaism has had its sons of the prophets, poets, visionaries, and lovers of God, but did not cultivate them in the same manner. Yet, Jewish spirituality has individuals and periods, such as sixteenth-century Safed, which produced creative saints.

KRISHNA IN VAISHNAVISM

Krishna appears as the great God in the *Bhagavad Gita*. However, other literature portrays Krishna as a god-child, a prankster, a model lover, a divine hero, and the Supreme Being. The most beloved image of Krishna is in the *Bhagavata Purana* as an adolescent cowherd who danced with the local cowherd girls, especially Radha, in the village of Vrindavan. In a multitude of pictures, Krishna has a common depiction as a young man in a characteristically relaxed pose, playing the flute. He often wears a silk dhoti and a peacock feather crown. Another favored image of him is as a cherubic infant eating butter.^[9]

The name Krishna originates from the Sanskrit word meaning black, dark, or dark blue, and is sometimes translated as all-attractive. Krishna is portrayed with a blue skin. Why is Krishna blue? Krishna is blue since it reminds one of the sea and sky, and thus the infinite heaven. The vast expanse of sky and sea symbolize infinity, thus symbolizing omnipotence. His blueness is explained like the blue-dyed *techelet* in Jewish fringes of *Tzitzit*, which look like the sea, which looks like the sky, which reminds you of God.

Krishna Worship

Followers of Krishna would consider themselves completely part of the Vaishnava tradition and could possibly object to separate treatment. Yet,

from a Jewish perspective, some groups' devotion to a specific personified incarnation makes their Krishnaism more problematic for Judaism than other forms of Hinduism, since it most resembles in the Jewish gaze the personified savior in Christianity. Since Krishna was incarnated into a human form and is worshiped as both God and human, it makes aspects of this devotional path similar to a Jewish conceptualization of Christianity as associating (*shituf*) an incarnation of Jesus with God. Others such as Vallabha think that Krishna is not human but God himself come to earth, as if in Christian thought the Father himself came down. [\[10\]](#)

Similar more to Christianity than to Judaism, Krishnaism focuses on the personality of Krishna and the personal ways he relates to his devotees, especially his saving those who believe in him. A believer tells stories of Krishna's childhood and seeks to love him, offering a path for salvation. Beyond these similarities, the movement may have had real Christian influence in the nineteenth century. Additionally, unlike most other forms of Hinduism, some forms actively seek converts (even among Hindus) and teach that salvation for everyone occurs through Krishna.

Like Christmas, the day of Krishna's birth in this world is celebrated on Krishna Janmastami. Followers fast and stay up until midnight, when Krishna is believed to have been born. Images of Krishna's infancy are placed in nativity swings and cradles in temples and homes. At midnight, devotees gather around for devotional songs, dance, and they exchange gifts. The devotee family strings garlands, hangs balloons, and festoons of leaves, and generally makes the house beautiful for Krishna's appearance. Stories about Krishna offer up an image of the eventual redemption in Mathura-Vrindava that is similar to the messianic age and heavenly stories.

Bhakti and Play of Krishna

According to the *Bhagavata Purana*, Krishna, as Radha's lover, danced with the *gopis* (herder girls) on the banks of the Yamuna river in Vrindavan. When the *gopis* became conceited about Lord Krishna dancing with them, he disappeared from their midst. In the agony of separation from their beloved Krishna, the *gopis* recalled and enacted His lilas (divine pastimes of His life), which over time came to be known as the *Rasalilas*.

These later stories of his pastimes are set in the area called Braj, which begins Kotban near Hodel about 95 km from Delhi, or more specifically the cities of Mathura-Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh, located 140 km southeast of Delhi. Every square foot of the Mathura-Vrindavan area is wrapped in timeless devotion to Lord Krishna, the eternal hero, the lover of Radha and the cowherd-prince. The relationship between Mathura and Krishna is like that of Jerusalem to the Bible.

Krishna has various other names, epithets, and titles. Among the most common names are Mohan (enchanter), Govinda (finder of the cows), and Gopala (protector of the cows).

There are many performances about Krishna in drama, dance, and poetry, making Krishna known in song, dance, and performance.

Gaudiya Vaishnavism–Chaitanya Vaishnavism

Gaudiya Vaishnavism (also known as Chaitanya Vaishnavism) is a Krishna-focused Vaishnava religious movement founded by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486–1534). It teaches a simple devotion to Krishna as the supreme deity in place of the complexity of Vaishnavite ideas of the divine. Gaudiya refers to the Gauda region (present day Bengal).

Gaudiya Vaishnavism focuses on the devotional worship of Radha and Krishna and their many divine incarnations as the supreme forms of God, replacing *Brahman*, Vishnu, or Nahrayan. As Krishna's consort, Radha is the source of all other Shaktis, including Lakshmi and Sita.

Krishnaism classifies itself as a monotheistic tradition, believing the many forms of Krishna are expansions or incarnations of the one supreme God. In Gaudiya Vaishnavism, Krishna is the original form of God; he is the source of Vishnu and not as his *avatara*. This belief is shared by the Nimbarka and Vallabha sampradayas, but not by the Ramanuja and Madhva schools, who view Krishna as an *avatara* of Vishnu.

This form emphasizes *bhakti* giving special attention to the congregational chanting of Krishna's names. Individual souls engage in devotional service to the Supreme Divine, and in turn, God lovingly reveals Himself. They advocate pure love of God as the ultimate aim, rather than liberation from the cycle of rebirth.

Popularly, this worship takes the form of singing Radha and Krishna's

holy names, such as Hare, Krishna, and Rama, most commonly in the form of *kirtan*, the Hare Krishna mantra. Gaudiya Vaishnavas believe that God has many forms and names, but that the name Krishna is the fullest as the eternal, all-knowing, omnipresent, all-powerful, and all-attractive Supreme Person.

Caitanya Mahaprabhu treats the *Bhagavad Gita* statement as paradigmatic and as applying to Krishna: “You are the Supreme Personality of Godhead, the ultimate abode, the purest, the Absolute Truth. You are the eternal, transcendental, original person, the unborn, and the greatest” (10:12–13). In Gaudiya Vaishnavas translations, words for divinity are usually translated as Krishna. By treating references to *Brahman* as Lord Krishna, they project Krishna’s identity onto the Upanishads.

Theology of Gaudiya Vaishnavism

The concept of *Achintya Bheda Abheda*, which translates to “inconceivable oneness and difference,” is a unique element of this philosophy. Caitanya Mahaprabhu strongly opposed Shankara’s non-dualism and established the principle of *acintya-bhedabheda-tattva* (oneness and difference). The Supreme and the individual soul are simultaneously one and different, meaning that the Supreme and the souls are the same in quality, being eternally spiritual, but always individually separate. The individual souls are insignificant and subject to influence by the material, while the Supreme is infinite and always above the material manifestation. Hence, individual souls are simultaneously the same in quality and different from a personal God through their materiality. Krishna’s unlimited divinity is inconceivable to the human mind, but His divinity can be experienced through the process of *bhakti*. In practice, Gaudiya Vaishnava philosophy has much more in common with the dualistic schools, since Krishna is worshiped as a supreme person.

Nineteenth Century

In the late nineteenth century, Bhaktivinode Thakur (1838–1914) and his son Bhaktisiddhanta Sarawati pioneered the contemporary forms of Gaudiya Vaisnavism, which presented the message of Krishnaism in a modern idiom as a response to modernizers and Christian values.

Bhaktivinode Thakur was born into a traditional Hindu family who were part of the newly created privileged class of largely Hindu Bengalis, who served the British administration in occupations requiring Western education and proficiency in English and other languages. The *bhadralok* class was influenced by the British's Western values, including their often condescending attitude toward cultural and religious traditions of India; as a result, the *bhadralok* themselves started questioning and reassessing the tenets of their own religion and customs. They saw their own traditions as a "reactionary and fossilized jumble of empty rituals."^[11] Their attempts to rationalize and modernize Hinduism in order to be more Western eventually gave rise to the Bengali Renaissance and Neo-Hinduism.

In 1879, Bhaktivinode wrote his first major work, a response to the severe criticism of Krishna's immoral, licentious behavior as incompatible with his divine status in Hinduism. Bhaktivinode sought to change that by reinvigorating the worship of the image of Krishna and the traditional devotional ecstasy and rituals through a rational, moral, and modern presentation of Krishnaism. He rejected all kinds of superstitions and magic, as well as rejecting Tantric practices as against divine wishes.

Bhaktivinode pioneered the spread of Caitanya's teachings in the West, even sending copies of his works to Ralph Waldo Emerson in the United States in 1880. Bhaktivinode borrowed popular Christian expressions such as universal fraternity, cultivation of the spirit, preach, and church, and deliberately used them in a Hindu context in order to adapt his message to the Western mind.

Bhaktivinode was analogous to the creation of a Jewish Neo-Orthodoxy, which accepted the Enlightenment world along with its universalism, aesthetics, and self-cultivation, while advocating the retention of the liturgy and rituals at the same time. However, unlike nineteenth-century Judaism, Bhaktivinode was also the equivalent of a Neo-Hasidism that reinstated emotional ecstasy and *bhakti*, as an emotional force against modernity.

Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, Bhaktivinode's son, inherited the vision of spreading this message in the West. He founded sixty-four centers in India and three in London. Bhaktisiddhanta accepted the latest advancements in technology, institutional building, communication, printing, and transportation. He strongly objected to erotic representations of the sacred love between Radha and Krishna, which permeated the popular culture of Bengal in art, theater, and folk songs.

ISKCON

Bhaktisiddhanta's disciple A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami (1896–1977) continued his guru's mission to spread Gaudiya Vaisnavism globally. In 1966, he founded the International Society for Krishna Consciousness in the United States, known colloquially as the Hare Krishna movement. Today, ISKCON is a worldwide confederation of more than 550 centers. [\[12\]](#)

Swami Prabhupada saw Krishnaism as the universal path of salvation for all humanity. ISKCON members engage in outreach and mission in order to spread Krishna consciousness, primarily by singing the Hare Krishna mantra in public places and selling books. Street preaching is one of the movement's most visible activities.

The congregational chanting of the maha-mantra—"Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare." as promoted by Sri Caitanya—is considered the most effective means of self-purification in this age. The mantra is considered to be a prayer to the Lord, "Please Lord, engage me in Your service."

Today, ISKCON's members accept formal initiation into the chanting of the Holy Name by vowing to abstain from intoxication, gambling, illicit sexual connections, and the eating of meat, fish, eggs, onions, and mushrooms. They believe that our state of mind is not only seen through the nature of our activities—how we dress, eat, talk, and so forth—but also affected by them.

In the 1960s, ISKCON's singing, devotionism, and sense of community

attracted many Jews, who found these lacking in many suburban Jewish congregations. At that time, much of ISKCON's American leadership consisted of Jewish-born converts.

In the early 1970's, ISKCON was accused of being a cult and engaging in brainwashing. The death of A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami left them in disarray. In the last quarter century, they have rehabilitated their image and changed their practices by focusing on building temples in India, opening restaurants, and participating in academic dialogue.

The Beatles' George Harrison fully embraced Krishna consciousness, which inspired songs like "Living in the Material World" and "My Sweet Lord." Harrison's introduction to Swami Prabhupada's book *Krsna* encapsulates ISKCON's attraction: "If there's a God, I want to see Him. It's pointless to believe in something without proof, and Krishna consciousness and meditation are methods where you can actually obtain God perception. In that way you can see, hear & play with God. Perhaps this may sound weird, but God is really there next to you."^[13]

Krishnaism's attraction has much in common with the happy dances of the Na Nach's followers of Rav Nachman of Breslov, serving God in corporeality of Chabad, and the singing devotions of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach. However, Krishna's followers actually get to play with God.

SHAKTISM- DURGA

Shaktism is a Hindu denomination that focuses worship upon Shakti or Devi, the Hindu divine mother and the feminine element of both. Only 2–3 percent of Hindus follow Shaktism as their sole denomination; however, Shaktism has so deeply permeated mainstream Hindu systems, such as Shaivism and Vaisnavism, that it is no longer a sect—instead, it is a strong element present in most Hindu denominations.^[14]

Female deities are mentioned in the Vedas. *Kena Upanishad* tells an early tale in which the Devi appears as the *shakti*, or essential power, of the Supreme *Brahman*. The Mahabharata, and great Tamil epic, the Silappatikaram (c. 100 CE), contain many references that confirm the ongoing vitality of Shakta worship.

Shakti Power

Shakti, meaning power or empowerment, is the primordial cosmic energy and represents the dynamic forces that move through the entire universe responsible for the creation, maintenance, and destruction of the universe. Shakti is identified as female energy because it is responsible for creation, like mothers are responsible for birth. Some goddesses embody the destructive aspects of *shakti*, such as death, degeneration, and illness, while other goddesses embody the creative and auspicious powers of *shakti*, such as nature, the elements, music, art, dance, and prosperity. As the great divine mother, Shakti most actively manifests through female embodiment and creativity or fertility.

Shakti is worshipped as the Supreme Being, as the Devi (the goddess) and as the Supreme *Brahman* itself. All other forms of divinity are considered to be merely her diverse manifestations. In the details of its philosophy and practice, Shaktism resembles Shaivism. However, practitioners of Shaktism focus most or all worship on Shakti. Shiva, the masculine aspect of divinity, is considered solely transcendent.

Shakti is personified as the gentle and benevolent Uma, consort of Shiva, or Kali, the terrifying force destroying evil, or Durga, the warrior who conquers forces that threaten the stability of the universe.

Devi Mahatmya

There are a half-dozen important Shakta-oriented *Puranas*. By far, the most important text of Shaktism is the *Devi Mahatmya* (also known as *Chandi-Path*) from the fifth through sixth centuries, which contains stories, theology, and ritual that create the Shakta path. The *Devi Mahatmya* captures the extreme aspects of the goddess, from her frighteningly fierce and destructive powers to her infinite love, benevolence, and grace. The second part of the text deals with the victory of Durga, a form of the goddess, over the buffalo demon Mahishasura, which displays virulent abilities.

Durga's image is prominent in the Hindu imagination. She rides a tiger and has many arms, which hold various weapons. These weapons include: a mace, a sword, a trident spear, a bow and arrow, a *chakra* (a sharp-edged disc that is thrown at the opponent), and a conch shell. At the same time, she displays a calm smile, expressing her benevolence. The goddess's violent

side, Kali, on the other hand, has a long, hanging tongue that instills fear into her opponents. However, it is precisely this dark aspect that makes her invincible against all attacks and violence.

The *Devi Mahatmya* is chanted as a ritual on Durga Puja, the annual October festival to Durga. It offers believers an opportunity to ask for the goddess's awesome power and benevolence to manifest in their own lives. The instructions for chanting this recitation, befitting a Jewish halakhic manual, emphasize that the chanting should be done with correct pronunciation, that one should not stop in the middle of a chapter, and that the book should be placed on a stand, preferably a copper plate. At the beginning and end of each chapter, bells are to be rung. Before reading, it is necessary to have the necessary intent to perform the act. Moreover, one should not talk, think, sleep, sneeze, yawn, or spit while reading, but should read with full concentration.

Later Developments: Devotional and Tantra

The later *Devi-Bhagavata Purana* not only retells the tales of the Devi, but also embellishes them with Shakta philosophical reflections and recasts many classic tales about Vishnu and other gods in a distinctly Shakta light. Herein, she becomes less of a warrior and more a nurturer and comforter of her devotees, and a teacher of wisdom. This development in the character stresses the necessity of love for the goddess. *Shri Vidya* is a Hindu Tantric religious system devoted to the goddess, in which she is worshiped in the form of a mystical diagram (*yantra*), a central focus and ritual object composed of nine intersecting triangles, called the *Shri Yantra*.

The *Lalita Sahasranama* is part of the *Brahmanda Purana* (South India, circa ninth to eleventh centuries CE) and extols the deeds of the Goddess, especially her slaying of the demon Bhandasura. This work offers the esoteric philosophy and practices of kundalini yoga and Shri Vidya Tantric Shaktism. In most schools of Shaktism, the *tantras* are central scriptures; subsequently, most tantric groups are devotees of Shaktism.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many Shakta-Tantric works popularized the Tantric ideas for the masses. One notable example is the *Mahanirvana Tantra*, characterized by its special modernism and liberal outlook, especially toward women. The passionate Shakta musical lyrics of

Ramprasad Sen (1720–1781) launched a wave of popular Shaktism. Thousands of Shakta poets appeared in Bengal after Ramprasad. From this point onward, Shaktism was a universal religion that touched nearly every aspect of Indian life.

The great Shakta saint, Sri Ramakrishna (1836–1886), made Shaktism part of Hindu modernism. Using his mystical experience of Shakti, he taught “the aim of all religions was the same and that the difference between the personal and the impersonal god was no more than that between ice and water.”^[15] Ramakrishna was so immersed in the spirit of the divine mother, he thought Shakti dwelled in his body and everything was her manifestation. He taught his followers to know, to love, and to seek the goddess’s oceanic, mystical presence. Ramakrishna considered his whole life to be a hymn to Kali.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Indian national movement has been personified as Mother India (*Baharat Mata*). This movement uses images of Durga on a lion as an icon for the Indian independence movement.

There are enduring goddess traditions all over India, especially in village culture. Village men, women, and children pray to a female deity. Many southern temples included shrines to the Shakti gods and a rich tradition of the cult of the village mothers, concerned with the facts of daily life.

Durga Puja

Durga Puja is an annual Hindu festival that celebrates Durga’s victory over the great demon Mahishasura, epitomizing the victory of good over evil. It is widely celebrated in the Eastern Indian states, where it is often the biggest festival of the year. The festival is observed for six days; each day has its own name and rituals and there are many regional variants.

The festival also includes the worship of Lakshmi (material wealth as all kinds of prosperity, glory, magnificence, joy, exaltation, and greatness) and Saraswati (cosmic intelligence, consciousness, and knowledge), both of whom are considered to be Durga’s children. The broader concept of the festival of Navaratri is of worshipping Durga, Lakshmi, and Saraswati and indicates that every person must integrate knowledge, wealth, and courage

in a balanced manner. Durga Puja's prominence increased gradually while the British Raj controlled Bengal, because the worship of Durga became popular among the regional aristocrats. The festivities became centered on entertainment as well as on lavish feasts. In the nineteenth century, the festival moved from being a show of wealth and authority by royalty and merchants and transitioned back to a festival of pure worship and community.

I arrived in India a few days before Durga Puja and witnessed the festival in several cities. Rather than my prior bookish study of Durga, I discovered a living twenty-first-century religion. Today's Durga Puja goes far beyond religion. It is a massive outdoor festival showcasing of music, dancing, art, and design. The art motif extends to elaborate interiors, executed by trained artists, with consistent stylistic elements, carefully executed, and bearing the artist's name.

The newspapers ran advertisements for sessions to raise awareness about women's safety—namely aimed at stopping violence against women—and discounts for women's gym memberships. The newspapers and television covered the Bollywood stars who attended Durga Puja events.

Thousands of temporary food-stalls that cater to massive crowds are installed on pavements and roadsides. Inside the complex edifices, there is a stage on which Durga reigns, standing on her lion mount, wielding ten weapons in her ten hands. Crowds gather to offer flower worship on the mornings of the sixth to ninth days. Durga Puja in Kolkata is often referred to as the Rio Carnival of the Eastern Hemisphere. People from all over the country visit the city at this time.

On the last day of the festival, there is a procession in which the sculpture is taken for immersion in the local river amid drumbeats and loud chants of "glory be to Mother Durga" and "it will happen again next year." The sculpture is cast in the waters, symbolizing the deity's departure to her home in the Himalayas.

After this, families visit each other and offer sweets to visitors. Since the festival is especially special in the Bengal region, I was fortunate to have a Bengali acquaintance show me around the festivities, including the temporary storefronts where Bengali expatriates prepare a feast for their connections from back home. I saw that only the teenagers and young men danced with the images to the river. The older folk, the majority of the

celebrants, stayed behind drinking tea.

The participants understood the holiday in allegorical and moral terms, just as Jews think of their festivals in terms of modern meaning rather than ancient metaphysics. Since most Hindus consider allegorical meanings such as the triumph of good over evil and emphasize annihilating demonic tendencies such as lust, anger, pride, and hypocrisy, Westerners should not dismiss these explanations as false or ahistorical.

The Feminine Deity in Judaism: Hebrew Bible

According to archeologist William Dever, there is evidence—such as an eighth-century BCE Hebrew inscription found in Khirbet el-Qí'm that says “by Yahweh and his Asherah”—that in popular tradition in ancient Israel, God had a wife. ^[16] Unlike official biblical religion, which forbids worshipping Asherah, Dever claims that Asherah was widely venerated in popular religion in ancient Israel as a consort to God. The Bible merely says not to portray God the male deity, but the mother goddess may be okay. There are many molds for making Asherah figurines, mass-producing them, and worshipping them in village shrines for fertility. The Hebrew University biblical scholar, Moshe Weinfeld, in contrast notes that Israelites would never worship the feminine as a separate deity or at a separate shrine. Instead, they would have mythic conceptions of the deity that incorporated the feminine.

In the book of Hosea, the concept of the divine sacred marriage was legitimated as a source of harmony in the world below with the world above. Hosea, who fought against the worship of the golden calves as well as worship at the high places, did not hesitate to adopt the imagery of the consort about the union of God with his bride Israel. This reunion in Hosea of the divine marriage foreshadows the kabbalistic reunion of the Holy One, blessed be He, with the *Shekhinah*.

Kabbalah: Shekhinah

The kabbalistic tradition describes the feminine image of the Godhead as Mother, Daughter, Sister, and Holy Spirit. In some cases in the Kabbalah, there is an equality between male and female while in other cases, the

female is clearly subservient and sustained by the male. A text of equality is “Male and female He created them” (Gen. 5:2), “Any image that does not embrace male and female is not a high and true image (*Zohar* I:55b). The notion of the masculine as purely inactive and passive is an idea intrinsic to the doctrine of Shakti, which is not in the approach of the Kabbalah, where the male is always portrayed as active.

In the Kabbalah, uniting the transcendent masculine and the immanent feminine is a core religious act. Here, images of the Divine Feminine are easy to find. The Jewish imagery is always the divine couple and their union. “When Israel proclaims the unity of Shema . . . ‘Hear O Israel-the Lord is one’, the Matron adorns herself in order to enter the chamber together with her husband. . . . Then her husband concentrates in her entrance into the chamber to be all alone with her, to become one” (*Zohar* II 135a).

In Judaism, the Sabbath is the time of the divine wedding. Friday night hymns are paeans to the divine feminine. One must sing and rejoice at the table in her honor; one must receive the Lady with many lighted candles, many enjoyments, beautiful clothes, and a house embellished with many fine appointments. The union of the divine king and his wife is shown in erotic colors in the Lurianic Sabbath songs. “Between right and left the Bride approaches in holy jewels and festive garments. Her husband embraces her in her foundation, gives her pleasure, . . . Basking in the oneness of holy light, She is crowned over and over to face the Holy King. All powers of wrath and masters of judgment flee from Her.”^[17]

Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of Jewish mysticism, notes some similarities between the *Shekhinah* and Shakti. He focuses on the similarity between the division of the *Shekhinah* into higher and lower elements of *binah* and *malkhut* and the parallel division between the higher feminine divine of Lakshmi and the lower feminine of *shakhti*. *Binah*, as the higher *Shekhinah*, is an active, creative, flowing creative energy; Scholem declares that the “upper *Shekhinah* is the *shakhti* of the latent God.” The lower *Shekhinah* is the immanent energy in exile and needs to be overcome or as immanent in earthly activity.^[18]

Yet according to Scholem, unlike *shakhti*, the lower *Shekhinah* is not itself the same as the manifest world; it is not the world of *maya*. Shakti is identified with *maya* itself in certain schools of Hindu thought, in which the

manifesting and the manifestation are Shakti and Maya. For the kabbalist, the spark of the *Shekhinah*, which resides within concrete things, is always distinct from the phenomenality of these same physical things. The spark can be elevated from the things in which it is mixed, without thereby affecting or undoing the physical phenomena. The lower *Shekhinah* operates in everything and animates everything, but the *Shekhinah*, after the destruction of the temple, is in exile. Hindu thought lacks this concept of the exile of the feminine.

Scholem also notes that the *Shekhinah* can function as the dark feminine and as the tree of death representing the chthonic; he compares it to the Vedic Devi giving birth to demons. Finally, in a narrative worthy of the *Puranas*, the *Tikkunei Zohar* presents the weak lower *Shekhinah* as a dove attacked by hawks, representing the evil forces of the world. She transforms herself into an eagle and defeats the hawks. The Egyptians drowning in the sea are personifications of the bad vices drowned by the *Shekhinah* as an eagle, much like Durga's defeat of the vices.^[19]

NOTES

1. Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, *Dancing with Siva: Hinduism's Contemporary Catechism*, 5th ed. (Himalayan Academy Publications: 1997); Rama Ghose, *Grace in Saiva Siddhanta* (Varanasi: Ashutosh Prakashan Sansthan, 1984); Richard Davis, *Ritual in an Oscillating Universe: Worshipping Śiva in Medieval India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1992); David Shulman, *More Than Real: A History of the Imagination in South India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); idem with Don Handelman, *Siva in the Forest of Pines. An Essay on Sorcery and Self-Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Mariasusai Dhavamony, *Love of God according to Saiva Siddhanta: A Study in the Mysticism and Theology of Saivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

2. Rama Ghose, *Grace in Saiva Siddhanta*, 121.

3. <https://www.saivism.net/prayers/suprabhatam.asp>

4. For examples, see Tirumular, *Tirumantiram: A Tamil Scriptural Classic: Tamil Text with English Translation and Notes*, B. Natarajan (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1991); Dominic Goodall, ed., *The Parākhyantra, a Scripture of the Śaiva Siddhānta: A Critical Edition and Annotated Translation*

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[5.](#) Paul Eduardo Muller-Ortega, *The Triadic Heart of Siva: Kaula Tantricism of Abhinavagupta in the Non-Dual Shaivism of Kashmir* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988); Bettina Bäumer, “The Four Spiritual Ways (upāya) in the Kashmir Śaiva Tradition” in *Hindu Spirituality: Postclassical and Modern* (New York: Crossroad, 1997).

[6.](#) Francis X. Clooney, *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Sri Vedanta Desika on Loving Surrender to God* (Georgetown University Press: 2008); John Carman, *Majesty and Meekness: A Comparative Study of Contrast and Harmony in the Concept of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994).

[7.](#) Most of the general works on Hinduism and Indian philosophy give an overview of the various schools.

[8.](#) Daniel Sheridan, *The Advaitic Theism of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (Columbia, MO: South Asia Books, 1986).

[9.](#) John Stratton Hawley, *Krishna, the Butter Thief* (Princeton University Press, 2014).

[10.](#) Shukavak N. Dasa, *Hindu Encounter with Modernity: Kedarnath Datta Bhaktivinoda, Vaishnava Theologian* (Los Angeles, CA: Sanskrit Religions Institute, 1999); Ravi M. Gupta, *Caitanya Vaisnava Vedanta of Jiva Gosvami's Caturstuti tika* (London: Routledge, 2007).

[11.](#) Ferdinando Sardella, Knut A. Jacobsen, (ed.), Brill's encyclopedia of Hinduism (Volume 5 ed.), Leiden, NL: Brill, 2013), 415–423.

[12.](#) Edwin Bryant and Maria Ekstrand, eds., *The Hare Krishna Movement: The Postcharismatic Fate of a Religious Transplant* (Columbia University Press, 2004); Mukunda Goswami, *Inside the Hare Krishna Movement: An Ancient Eastern Religious Tradition Comes of Age in the Western World* (Torchlight Pub., 2001); Graham Dwyer and Richard J. Cole, *The Hare Krishna Movement. Forty Years of Chant and Change* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2007).

[13.](#) George Harrison, preface to *Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, Abhay Charan, Krsna* (New York: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1974).

[14.](#) N. N. Bhattacharyya, *History of the Sakta Religion*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1974); C. Mackenzie Brown, *The Devi Gita: The Song of the Goddess: A Translation, Annotation and Commentary* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998); David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*

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[15.](#) Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya, *History of the Śākta Religion* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1996): 201.

[16.](#) William G. Dever, "Recent Archaeological Confirmation of the Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel," *Hebrew Studies* 23 (1982): 37–43; Moshe Weinfeld, "Feminine Features in the Imagery of God in Israel: The Sacred Marriage and the Sacred Tree" *Vetus Testamentum* 46, Fasc. 4 (October 1996): 515–529.

[17.](#) Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York, Schocken Books, 1960): 143.

[18.](#) Gershom Scholem, "Shekinah: The Feminine Element in Divinity" in *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991).

[19.](#) *Tikkunei ha-Zohar* 22b–23a, 117a; *Tikkunei Zohar Hadash*, 116b.

Chapter 5

Hindu Sacred Narratives and Piety

PURANAS

Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great Jewish theologian, argued that Judaism might have situated itself as an Asian religion “between the River Jordan and the River Ganges.” He even speculates: “Had Judaism been situated at the foot of the Himalayas, monotheistic philosophy would have been modified by the tradition of oriental thinkers.” What modification to Jewish monotheism did Heschel envision? (*God in Search of Man*, 15). Elsewhere, Heschel explains his vision by citing Heinrich Zimmer’s *Philosophy of India* about the fluid categories of God in the Hindu myths, where God delights with joy in taking various forms and relating to humans (*The Prophets*, 301).

According to Heschel, Indian thought offers a way to appreciate the biblical God as one emotionally moved with pathos for the human condition. When the verse in Genesis described that God walked in the Garden of Eden, it prompts the question: What does it mean for God to walk in a garden? Heschel’s goal was to show that the God of the Bible was a passionate deity who talked and walked with people. He wanted to stop associating Judaism solely with Maimonides’ unmoved mover of Greek philosophy. Indian myths provided Heschel with a potential key for understanding a strolling deity.

In sum, how does the Bible compare to the Hindu stories?

An anecdote from my teaching in India provides us a step toward the answer. When we were discussing Genesis, the Hindu professor who was sitting in on my Judaism lectures jumped up from the old wooden school desk, proclaiming that the biblical stories are “God in search of man!”—using the very words that A. J. Heschel used to describe the Bible. In the Bible, the human person does not get lost amid the many gods, cosmology, and cosmic forces of the Hindu *Puranas*; rather the Bible presents the direct relationship between God and his chosen people.

What Are the Puranas?

The term “Hindu myth” is somewhat of a misnomer. The *Puranas* are a series of books with stories of gods, cosmology, and spiritual forces. There are eighteen canonical *Puranas*, which provide the narrative basis for the Hindu denominations. Like the Pentateuch, the *Puranas* mix an account of the holiness of temple sites, the laws and rituals of those sites, genealogies of kings, cosmology, and stories of the gods. While Western books on Hinduism focus only on stories of the gods as Hindu myths, the *Puranas* themselves are much more focused on ritual, pilgrimage, and cosmology.^[1]

Purana literally means of ancient times, and these books not only give a primordial history of the world, creation, and the kings, but also heroes, sages, and demigods, and descriptions of Hindu cosmology, philosophy, and geography. Along the way, there are also discussions of crafts, astrology, and medicine.

The *Puranas* contain a lot of material about ritual practice. For example, they contain the aarti practice still performed on the banks of the Ganges, discussions of the sacredness of temples, and the virtues of pilgrimage.

The stories in these volumes are well known and visible throughout India, outside of the formal study of the text. They are ever-present in the depictions of the gods in plays, children’s books, comics, television, movies, advertisement, and billboards. However, at the same time, the *Puranas* are understood through learned commentary, philology, and philosophic debate, just as Jews understand the Bible.

Though some of the *Purana* material may date to the time of the final redaction of the Vedas, most of the written text is contemporary with the rise of devotional cults, which centered upon a particular deity, during the Gupta era (350–550 CE). The *Puranas’* edited contents are as fluid as the late Jewish Midrash collection *Yalkut Shemoni*, which has midrashic stories from 200 BCE to 600 CE but was continually edited until the thirteenth century. In the case of the *Puranas*, some of the edits range from antiquity to the seventeenth century, and appear via oral and translated editions.

The text’s fluidity is great. Imagine if the Bible was so loosely canonized that Midrash could still be incorporated into the rewritten text for another

millennium, and that when the Bible was translated into the vernacular, each translator took a free midrashic hand to the translation. In addition, imagine that each specific denomination edited the books for that specific denomination. This process is how different *Puranas* have alternative versions of the same stories; in these alternatives, different gods are assigned the role as the protagonist and different holy sites are emphasized. To return to my analogy from chapter 2, it is as if the biblical canon accepted all the variants of the flood story from the Bible, Gilgamesh, and elsewhere in the Near East.

In India, the *Puranas* are usually read in vernacular translations and in prior eras they were disseminated by Brahmin scholars, who read from them and orally recounted their stories, in what are called Katha sessions, in which a traveling Brahmin settles for a few weeks in a temple and narrates parts of a *Purana*.

Eighteen Puranas and Ten Avataras

The world of the *Puranas* contradicts much of the religious philosophy discussed in other chapters. Unlike the theological works, here, the gods are almost human like the Greek gods; they have spouses and children, fight wars, feel jealous and angry, bestow magical gifts, and walk on the earth. In the *Puranas*, even the infinite, unknown Brahma, is said to live on an island, where he receives visitors like a royal. In various Puranic texts, Vishnu, Shiva, or Devi are described as the Absolute and as the Creator.

The *Puranas* are the resource for the stories of the *avataras* of the gods. Vishnu has ten *avataras* to save the world from some great danger, to destroy the wicked, and to protect the virtuous. The ten *avataras* are: The Fish, The Tortoise, The Boar, The Man-Lion, The Dwarf, Rama with the Axe (the destroyer of the Kshatriya race), Ramachandra (the hero of the Ramayana, who destroyed Ravana), Sri Krishna (the teacher of the *Gita*), Buddha (the prince-ascetic), and Kalki (the hero riding on a white horse, who is to come at the end of the Kali-Yuga). As many as forty specific *avataras* of Vishnu are mentioned in the *Bhagavata Purana*, and it numerically lists twenty-two *avataras* in the first book, even though the book adds that the number is innumerable.

In the *Puranas*, *avataras* mean the appearance of the actual god on

earth, in which Vishnu is an actual character who takes on many different forms of appearance on earth. This is unlike the complex emanation scheme of the five levels of *avatara* from the infinite unknown absolute deity down to the world as presented in the Agamic literature.

The Churning of the Ocean of Milk

It is impossible here to give a summary of these many *avatars* and stories, but one of the main stories for framing the Hindu religious sensibility is the Churning of the Ocean of Milk (*Samudra Manthan*), one of the best-known episodes in the *Puranas* with variants in several works.

While riding on an elephant Airawat, Indra, the king of *devas*, came across Sage Durvasa who offered him a special garland given to him by the God Shiva. Indra accepted the garland, placing it on the trunk of the elephant as a test to prove that he was not an egoistic god. The elephant, knowing that Indra had no control over his own ego, threw the garland to the ground. This enraged the sage as the garland was a dwelling of the goddess Sri (fortune) and was to be treated as an offering. Sage Durvasa cursed Indra and all *devas* to be bereft of all strength, energy, and fortune.

In the battles that followed this incident, the *devas* were defeated and the *asuras* (demons) led by King Bali gained control of the universe. The *devas* sought help from the Supreme God Vishnu, who advised them to treat *asuras* in a diplomatic manner. The *devas* formed an alliance with *asuras* to jointly churn the ocean for the nectar of immortality and to share it among them. However, Vishnu told the *devas* that He would arrange that they alone obtain the nectar.

The churning of the Ocean of Milk was an elaborate process. Mount Mandara was used as the churning rod, and Vasuki, the king of serpents who abides on Shiva's neck, became the churning rope. The demons demanded that they hold the head of the snake, while the gods—taking advice from Vishnu—agreed to hold its tail. As a result, the demons were poisoned by the fumes emitted by Vasuki. Despite this, the gods and demons pulled back and forth on the snake's body alternately, causing the mountain to rotate, which in turn churned the ocean. However, once the mountain was placed on the ocean, it began to sink. Vishnu, in the form of a turtle Kurma, came to their rescue and supported the mountain on his back.

The churning process released a number of things from the Milk Ocean. One product was the lethal poison, which terrified the gods and demons because the poison was so powerful that it could destroy all of creation. Then the gods approached Shiva for protection. Shiva consumed the poison in an act to protect the universe, and his wife Parvati pressed her hand on Shiva's throat to save the universe. As a result, the color of Shiva's neck turned blue. For this reason, Lord Shiva is also called *Neelakanta* (blue-throated).

All kinds of herbs were cast into the ocean and fourteen treasures were produced from the ocean and were divided between *asuras* and gods. Finally, the heavenly physician emerged with a pot containing the heavenly nectar of immortality. Fierce fighting ensued between the *devas* and *asuras* for the nectar. To protect the nectar from *asuras*, the divine Garuda took the pot, and flew away from the battle-scene. While Garuda was in his flight over planet Earth, four drops of nectar fell at four places—Prayag (Allahabad), Haridwar, Ujjain, and Nasik. Based on this legend, these places acquired a mystical power, celebrated at the Kumbh Mela festival, held at the four places every twelve years for this reason. By bathing there during the Kumbha Mela, one can attain the primeval heaven and liberation.

Afterwards, Vishnu took the form of a beautiful and enchanting damsel, distracted the *asuras*, took the amrita, and distributed it among the *devas*, who drank it. The story ends with the rejuvenated *devas* defeating the *asuras*.

Demigods and Spirits

As shown by the above story, there is a huge realm of demigods, *devas*, and demons. The stories are the grand war between the demons—*asuras* and demigods—*devataas*, because *asuras* are usually valiant, strong-headed, and desire to conquer the territories the *devataas* occupy.

Devataa are the minor supernatural beings. They are personified natural forces like Vayu, *devataa* of wind; Agni, *devataa* of fire; and Varuni

or Sura, goddess and creator of alcohol. They also include mythical supernatural animals like Kamadhenu, the wish-granting divine cow, or Uchhaishravas, the divine seven-headed horse.

An infinite number of creatures inhabits the world of Hinduism. To give a sense of the variety, consider the Nagas (snake-spirits) half-human, but with a serpent's tail, who dwell underground and guard great treasures. The Yakshas are a sort of gnome or fairy. The Gandharvas, all male, are servants of Indra and heavenly musicians. The Kinnaras, or Indian centaurs, are associated with them. The female counterparts of the Gandharvas are the Apsarases, beautiful and libidinous divine nymphs, who delight in tempting ascetics in their meditations.

Apart from the traditional human weapons like swords, daggers, spears, clubs, shields, bows, arrows, and maces, and the weapons used by the gods (such as Indra's thunderbolt Vajra), the texts mention the use of various divine weapons by various heroes, each associated with a certain god or deity. Most often, gods give these weapons to semi-divine beings and human beings. They include Shankha Vishnu's conch, the umbrella taken by Varuna, and the earrings given to Aditi by her son Indra.

The Puranic books' moral lessons resemble a divine chutes and ladders game, a game not coincidentally was invented in India; they consist of learning about virtues, mistakes, penance, gifts, and curses. One recurring theme is the need for penances, like withdrawing from the world, forgoing pleasures, and engaging in meditation. In many penance cases, Brahma, Vishnu, or Shiva usually appear and grant a wish or a power to the person.

Hindu Creationism

The presentation of act of creation has many variants. In *Garuda Purana*, there was nothing in the universe except the *Brahman*. The universe became an expanse of water, and Vishnu was born in the golden egg in that expanse. In *Vishnu Purana*, the original primordial man, Purusha, is identified with the creator deity Brahma, and is part of Vishnu. In contrast, the philosophic *Advaita Vedanta* states that the creation arises from Brahma, but it is illusory without reality separate from *Brahman*.

The *Shatapatha Brahmana* says that in the beginning, Prajapati, the first creator or father of all, was alone in the world. He differentiated himself

into two beings, husband and wife. The wife regarded union with her producer as incest, fled from his embraces, and assumed various animal disguises in order to hide. The husband pursued in the form of the male of each animal, and from these unions sprang the various species of beasts (*Shatapatha Brahmana*, xiv. 4, 2).

Hindu Flood Story

The *Puranas* present many related versions of the flood story, which all bear an uncanny resemblance to the biblical flood story. All of these accounts agree that the flood story's protagonist is a man named Manu. Like Noah, Manu is described as a virtuous individual "who, by penances and prayers, had won the favor of the lord of heaven." (*Shatapatha Brahmana* I:8 *Matsya Purana*). Both Manu and Noah had three sons before the flood—Charma, Sharma, and Yapeti, and Ham, Shem, and Japheth, respectively.

In Genesis, the cause of humanity's destruction is that the "wickedness of man was great in the earth" (ch. 6). In the story of Manu, however, the destruction of the world was part of the natural order of things, rather than as a divine punishment.

Brahma chose Manu because of his worship. "Manu then went to the foothills of mountain and meditated for thousands of years. Brahma appeared before him. "I am pleased with your prayers," said Brahma. "Ask for a favor." Manu replied "Sooner or later there will be a destruction of the world. Please grant me the favor that it will be I who will save the world" (*Matsya Purana*).

In Genesis, God saves Noah by instructing him to build an Ark. In the Hindu version, Vishnu appears to Manu in the form of a little fish while Manu was performing his ablutions in a pond. Manu kept the fish, which grew so quickly that its body occupied the entire ocean in a matter of days. It was then that Vishnu revealed his identity to Manu, telling him about the impending destruction. Vishnu instructed Manu to build a strong ark and fill it with animals and seeds to repopulate the earth. He must take on board

the Seven Sages, who have existed since the beginning of time, and seeds of all things and a pair of each animal (*Matsya Purana*). When the time came, Manu was to tie the boat to the horn of the fish so that the fish could drag the ark.

After the flood, Noah's Ark rested on the mountains of Ararat. Similarly, Manu's boat was perched on the top of a range of mountains when the waters had subsided. Both Noah and Manu were told to repopulate the earth, and all human beings could trace their ancestry to one of these flood survivors. These are close enough parallels between the biblical and Hindu versions, despite the differences, to need an explanation.

The Nature of Time-Yuga

In Hindu cosmology, a universe endures for about 4,320 million earthly years—which is one day or *kalpa* for Brahma, the creator—and is then destroyed. At this point, Brahma rests for one night, which is just as long as the day. This process, called *pralaya* (cataclysm), repeats for one hundred Brahma years (311 trillion, forty billion human years). That time is Brahma's lifespan. After this time, the whole universe returns to the ineffable world-spirit until another creator god is evolved and a new Manu appears, as the progenitor of the human race. We are now in the seventh Manu cycle of the *kalpa*, which contains seventy-one aeons, of which a thousand form the *kalpa*.

Each aeon divides into four *yugas* or ages. Each age represents a progressive decline in piety, morality, strength, stature, longevity, and happiness. The present age is in the fourth yuga of confusion, overthrow of the established standards, the cessation of all religious rites, and the rule of cruel and alien kings.

Few know that medieval Jewry cosmology also describes long cosmic cycles in which the world would be renewed and then destroyed over the course of the aeons. This is true in kabbalistic works, like the *Sefer Haterumot* and Isaac of Accho's writings. For Isaac, Adam was created when

the universe was forty-two thousand divine years old, and six worlds were created and destroyed before the creation of Adam. God's year is a thousand times ours, so every 365,000 years the world is destroyed and re-created. However, even in the Middle Ages, kabbalists part company from the implications of Hindu endless time, which is that we are meaningless specks in march of history. Rather, in Judaism, God has a clear vision of the purpose and timetable of history, and a redemption in the end of days that will end the cosmic cycle.^[2]

Modern Anxieties

Hindu philosophic works are indeed worried about the anthropomorphisms and the unnatural and magical events in the stories, much like the way Jewish philosophers were worried about biblical anthropomorphism. Some Hindu modernists dismiss *Purana* stories as dated fables. Nevertheless, most contemporary believers who read the *Puranas* understand them as allegories or believe they have deeper messages that require spiritual understanding. They see the *Puranas* as popularizing the Vedic religion for ordinary people through concrete examples, myths, stories, and legends. In this, it is similar to the way in which Jewish biblical commentaries deal with biblical anthropomorphisms.

Heinrich Zimmer and Alain Danielou

In contrast, some Western scholars—usually those associated with the psychological study of myth—considered the myths the essence of Hinduism.^[3]

Abraham Joshua Heschel learned about the Hindu myths from the writings of one of these scholars, Heinrich Zimmer (1890–1943). Zimmer was a Swiss Indologist who, like Gershom Scholem, was a member of Carl Jung's

Eranos circle. Zimmer saw Hindu myths as Jungian symbols that arise out of our imaginations informed by the psyche. For Zimmer, it is difficult to separate imagination, creativity, and the psyche, all of which become manifest in symbols and myths. The Indian mythologies, in his reading, are teeming with images: literary, visual, and poetic, which support these rich psychic mythologies. Zimmer himself was a disciple of Ramana Maharshi, who treated the images as psychic products on the way of realizing the self.

Another Western approach to the Puranic stories is that of Alain Danielou, artist and Western believer in Hinduism who wrote that these stories find their greatness in showing how everything is relative to the individual self and its level of development. Acknowledging God's unknown infiniteness allows each person to have his or her own finite version for worship. "In the polytheistic religion each individual worshiper has a chosen deity (*ista-devata*) and does not usually worship other gods in the same way as his own, as the one he feels nearer to himself. Yet he acknowledges other gods." All deities spring from the same individual connection to the unknown ever beyond his grasp, who in no way can be worshiped. "Since he realizes that other deities are but other aspects of the one he worships, he is basically tolerant."^[4] Nevertheless, unlike Danielou, for most traditional Hindus, the canon of eighteen *Puranas* are eternal knowledge and sacred scripture internalized in art and performance, not personal psychic journey.

BHAGAVAD GITA

The *Bhagavad Gita* is a seven hundred-verse Hindu sacred narrative in Sanskrit that is part of the epic Mahabharata. Traditionalists assert that the *Gita* came into existence in the third or fourth millennium BCE. Scholars accept dates from the fifth century BCE to the second century BCE as the probable range.^[5]

The *Bhagavad Gita* opens dramatically on the battlefield on the plains of Kurukshetra in the modern state of Haryana in India. Rival Pandavas and Kauravas clans are meeting for a major battle after all efforts at diplomacy failed. Both sides have alliances that allow them to gather great armies. Battle lines are arrayed, leaders blow conch shells, horses are harnessed, and the battle is ready to begin. At that moment, the Pandava prince Arjun is overcome with doubt. What is the proper duty? What does God want

from him?

Turning to his charioteer, Arjun expresses his doubts. The driver reveals himself first as God (Lord Krishna) and then as the infinite divine. The rest of the book is a conversation on ethics, duty, liberation, the service of God, and philosophy. Arjun is counselled by Lord Krishna to not only fulfill his Kshatriya (warrior) duty but also to serve for a higher cause. The *Gita's* battlefield setting has been interpreted as an allegory for the ethical and moral struggles of the human life.

The *Bhagavad Gita* presents a synthesis of the concept of *dharma*; theistic *bhakti*; and the yogic ideals of *moksha* through *jnana*, *bhakti*, and *karma*; with *Samkhya* philosophy creating a rich and wide Vaishnava worldview. The popular theism expressed elsewhere in the Mahabharata and the transcendentalism of the Upanishads converge into a God of personal characteristics identified with the *Brahman* of the Vedic tradition. Thus, the work gives a typology of the three dominant trends of Indian religion: *dharma*-based householder life, enlightenment-based renunciation, and devotion-based theism.

The *Bhagavad Gita* has generated diverse commentaries with widely differing views on the essentials. Advaitans, Dvaitans, Yogi, and Bhakti all wrote commentaries to support their own reading of the work as in continuity with their own view. Currently, there are over three hundred translations into English, each offering a unique translation and commentary.

Like the Bible for Jews, the *Gita* has taken on a role as the scripture of Hinduism for many Vaishnava. For example, on January 4, 2013, the *Bhagavad Gita* was used for the first time at a congressional swearing-in ceremony by Hawaii Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, the first Hindu to join either chamber of Congress. Gabbard, a Vaishnava, stated: "I chose to take the oath of office with my personal copy of the Bhagavad-Gita because its teachings have inspired me to strive to be a servant-leader, dedicating my life in the service of others and to my country." Gabbard, who served in the Iraq War recounted: "My Gita has been a tremendous source of inner peace and strength through many tough challenges in life, including being in the midst of death and turmoil while serving our country in the Middle East." In so doing, she said that she has "been blessed with the motivation and

strength to dedicate my life in service to others in a variety of ways.”^[6]

Karma Yoga

The book’s most common takeaway is the importance of the path of Karma Yoga, which upholds the necessity of action undertaken without any attachment to the work or desire for results. The *Bhagavad Gita* terms this “inaction in action and action in inaction” (4.18). The concept of such detached action is also called *Nishkam Karma*, a term not used in the *Gita*.

Therefore, one should not withdraw from the world of social involvement, but rather live in the world detached from the fruits of actions, since “action is better than inaction” and “renunciation of all action is impossible” (3.8). As a result, Krishna’s command to Arjun is: “Always act with detachment to the fruits of actions. The one who is acting without attachment attains God” (3.19).

The duty that forces Arjuna to fight (2.33) is his *dharma*, that is, his duty as a warrior. This nature (*prakriti*) or, more specifically, the way the three *gunas* influence one’s mind is under the influence of past karma. Therefore, Arjuna is not free to fulfill his *dharma*, but is rather compelled by his karma to act according to it. The book is not advocating that anything is good if done with devotional intent, rather that one should follow the moral, ethical, and social obligations as an act of devotion. “To achieve true liberation, it is important to control all mental desires and tendencies to enjoy sense pleasures because attachment springs from desire and from desire comes anger. From anger arises bewilderment, and loss of memory; these lead to the destruction of intelligence causing one to perish” (2.62–3).

Spiritual perfection is not attained by asceticism or by abandoning action, but by giving a new meaning to action—that of detachment from its fruits. Such an attitude of mind does not feed karma and reincarnation. Krishna formulates the famous principle: “Be focused on action and not on the fruits of action. Do not become confused in attachment to the fruit of your actions and do not become confused in the desire for inaction (2.47).”

On the one hand, Krishna reigns over the law of karma, and uses it to punish or reward. On the other hand, karma seems to be a law that functions by itself, with no external control. One has to struggle alone

against its drive and attain better incarnations from one existence to the next.

In 2009, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein (d. 2015), Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshivat Har Etzion, gave a discourse for over an hour on the *Bhagavad Gita* as an illustration of the Torah's concept of duty. For him, the Torah teaches the need to do the right action without worry for the results similar to *Nishkam Karma*. "To action alone hast thou a right and never at all to its fruits; let not the fruits of action be thy motive; neither let there be in thee any attachment to inaction" (*Bhagavad Gita* 2.47). He also used it to teach the need for the Torah scholar to have self-control, discipline, and freedom from attachment. "With the body, with the mind, with the intellect, even merely with the senses, perform action toward self-purification, having abandoned attachment. He who is disciplined in Yoga, having abandoned the fruit of action, attains steady peace" (2.48).

Bhakti and Jnana Yoga

Some readers focus on later passages, which explain theistic devotion as *bhakti* consisting of unceasing and loving remembrance of God. Faith (*Sraddha*) and total surrender to a chosen God (*Ishta-deva*) are considered to be important aspects of *bhakti*. The popular English translation and commentary of the work produced by ISKCON by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada emphasizes the devotional path in the book.^[7] Mere knowledge of the scriptures cannot lead to the final release. "Devotion, meditation, and worship are essential." Similarly, "And of all yogis, he who is full of faith worships Me, with his inner self abiding in Me, him, I hold to be the most attuned (to Me in Yoga)" (6.47). Even more so in this verse: "Consider all your acts as acts of devotion to me, whether eating, offering, giving away, performing austerities. Perform them as an offering to me. In this way you will be free from karma, you will be liberated and you will come to me" (9.27).

Other readers of the book, such as Shankara and most Advaitans, focus on *jnana* yoga consisting of the path of wisdom, knowledge, and direct experience of *Brahman* as the ultimate reality. The path renounces both desires and actions, and is therefore depicted as being steep and very

difficult. The *Bhagavad Gita* is depicted as focusing on the attainment of *Vedanta* insight of the identity of the *atman* with the *Brahman*. For the followers of this path, the realization of the identity of *atman* and *Brahman* is held as the key to liberation.

Those who emphasize *jnana* treat the work as a progression from one rung to another, a successive approach in which karma yoga leads to *bhakti* yoga, which in turn leads to *jnana* yoga. For others, *jnana* leads to *bhakti*, or they are equal.

God in the *Gita*

The *Gita* presents both theistic and panentheistic images of God and both interpretations continue in the commentaries and translations. In the *Gita*, Krishna is presented as theistic when He is called the Supreme Lord of the Universe (5.29), eternal (4.6) and the source of all existence: “I am the source of all spiritual and material worlds. At the same time, he is panentheistic as it says: “everything emanates from me” (10.8). He is said to be not only the creator but also the substance of the universe (9.16–19; 8.4; 10.20–42).

The noted historian of Indian thought, S. Dasgupta comments: “The *Gita* combines together different conceptions of God without feeling the necessity of reconciling the oppositions or contradictions involved in them.” The work combines “the concept of God as unmanifested, differenceless entity with the notion of Him as the super-person Who incarnates Himself on earth in the human form and behaves in the human manner.”^[8]

Modern Interpretations of Dharma

Modern Hindus read their classic texts as applying to contemporary issues, the same way Jews read the Talmud or Maimonides as applying to current concerns. People grow up hearing the *Gita* applied in a variety of socially relevant ways that in the mind of most people is more basic than historical commentaries. Swami Vivekananda emphasized that the war is only an allegory of the war between good and evil tendencies, which is constantly going on within the human person.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the Indian social reformer and independence activist, wrote the widely accepted *Gita Rahasya*, a 1915 Marathi language book, while he was in prison, which presents Karma Yoga as this worldly action; one has to fight for one's family, one's economic prosperity, and for one's country. For Tilak, "The real spirit is to make the country your family instead of working only for your own. The step beyond is to serve humanity and the next step is to serve God."^[9] The *Gita*'s real message is to act or perform, rather than renounce. As a revolutionary for India's independence from colonialization, he defended political action as long as it was selfless and without personal interest or motive.

He also established the modern application of the *Mimamsa* rule to the *Gita* of following a general rule over specific rules, in that the discussion of Karma Yoga and action at the start of the *Gita* takes precedent over the more pietistic emphasis on devotion at the end of the work.

Another widely influential interpretation is that of Mahatma Gandhi, whose views of the *Gita* as advocating non-violence was uniquely his and not all in line with traditional interpretations. Gandhi presented the *Gita* as largely symbolic of the central battle of the war within each of us against those elements of our characters or minds that we are very attached to, but are ultimately detrimental to the performance of our sacred duty, or impede our understanding of the infinite spirit (*Brahman*). The path of passive political resistance was a willingness to die like a soldier as his duty for the cause of India's freedom, but not kill anyone.

In a completely different direction, Aurobindo modernizes the concept of *dharma* by internalizing it, away from the social order and its duties and instead toward one's personal capacities, a celebration of individualism. A person finds "the fulfillment of the purpose of existence in the individual alone." He deduced from the *Gita* the doctrine that "the functions of a man ought to be determined by his natural turn, gift, and capacities," and thereby would be best able to serve society.^[10]

In the twenty-first century, the *Gita* became a source of quotes for popular psychology and for business motivational works counseling people to take great pleasure in their work, to learn to manage their emotions, to treat everyone and everything the same, to do good things without expecting anything in return, and never to run away from their duty.

Theophany

The *Bhagavad Gita* contains a chapter where Arjuna asks to see God's glory, his full infinite form, which almost directly parallels Moses's request to see God's glory after the giving of the Torah in Exodus 33. In the *Gita*, however, Arjuna indeed receives a vision of God as infinite, encompassing all of the universe (omniform), while Moses is told that he can only see God from behind, through God's actions on earth. Moses is told that human eyes cannot see the infinite divine while Arjuna is also told that he cannot see God with human eyes so that he needs to be given unlimited mystical eyes. Moses, however, does merit to see the divine stool of sapphire and later prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel see a vision of the divine throne. Elsewhere, the Bible states that Moses saw God "face to face" (Deut. 34:10), but we are never given a description of this vision.

Arjuna first sees the omniform of the divine that incorporates the entire universe (Vishvarupa) and then Brahma on a lotus flower.

But you cannot see Me with your present eyes. Therefore, I give to you divine eyes by which you can behold My mystic opulence . . . Arjuna saw in that universal form unlimited mouths and unlimited eyes. It was all wondrous. The form was decorated with divine, dazzling ornaments and arrayed in many garbs. He was garlanded gloriously, and there were many scents smeared over His body. All was magnificent, all-expanding, unlimited.

This was seen by Arjuna. If hundreds of thousands of suns rose up at once into the sky, they might resemble the effulgence of the Supreme Person in that universal form.

At that time Arjuna could see in the universal form of the Lord the unlimited expansions of the universe situated in one place although divided into many, many thousands.

Then, bewildered and astonished, his hair standing on end, Arjuna began to pray with folded hands, offering obeisances to the Supreme Lord. Arjuna said: My dear Lord Kṛṣṇa, I see assembled together in

Your body all the demigods and various other living entities. I see Brahmā sitting on the lotus flower as well as Lord Shiva and many sages and divine serpents. (Chapter 11, verse 8, 10–15)

You are the invincible source, the cause of all causes, transcendental to this material manifestation. (11:37)

Early Gupta and post-Gupta sculptors who were faced with the difficulty of portraying infiniteness chose to present Vishvarupa as a multi-headed and multi-armed god or all components of the universe displayed in the body of the deity.

What does this vision mean in classic Hindu theology?^[11]

Ramanuja, the qualified monism sees in this vision a Supreme Being and ultimate personality who “possesses all divine attributes such a wisdom, power, sovereignty, splendor and glory to the maximum degree that is not found to be possessed by any other except Himself.” Ramanuja credits Arjuna with a revelation of all things from “Brahma and all the demigods down to a humble blade of grass. He could see the complete animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms and all the diverse planetary systems” (commentary ad loc.). Nahmanides, the thirteenth-century Jewish thinker, similarly claims that the revelation to Moses gave him knowledge of the divine and the knowledge of all things animal, vegetable, and mineral.

It is worth noting that Ramanuja thinks that all the *devas* or demigods, as well as all other semi-divine beings are themselves not God and hence came to witness the display of the infinite divine, and that Arjuna and all the beings subsequently rejoiced.

The dvaita dualist Madhva emphasized how Krishna is the ultimate controller of each and every manifest form in which the one becomes the many. Madhva emphasizes that “the variation in form of the essence is not distinct or separate from the essence itself” or else the divine manifestation would not be one and eternal. He also noted that the infinite essence is knowable by humans through manifestations because “if the form is not knowable then the essence would also be unknowable” (commentary ad loc.). One *avatara* is not distinct from another in essence because of their differences in form.

Yet, despite the identity of the essence of divine and manifestation,

they remain different from the infinite in that the knowledge of the form will not lead to the knowledge of the essence itself. For Madhva, the non-distinction of manifestations and forms exists because humans perceive in the physical world using physical bodies that are susceptible to illusion and materiality, so the essence is only known by realization through meditation, reflection, or enlightenment.

Madhva stresses that the emanations and forms are considered independent of the divine essence and that one should not treat them as separate gods. Despite his dualism, “One who thinks that the name, form, attributes, or divine pastimes or holy abode of the Supreme Lord Krishna or any of His authorized incarnations and expansions to be distinct and separate from Him in any way will also fall down from the higher levels of existence” (commentary ad. loc.). Every earthly action is his, even if it is done through the will of the divine transcendental manifest in one of his infinite forms.

One can compare this to almost every Jewish Kabbalist, who even though they accept the need for divine forms to allow the infinite to be manifest, warn against treating the lower emanated or sefirotic realms as independent from the infinite essence, since doing so would be “cutting the shoots” (*kotsetz benitivot*)—separating the manifestation from the Essence. However, for the Jewish rationalist,—for whom there are no divine forms—the divine is known solely through the natural realm or through book knowledge.

Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits, in his work *God, Man, and History*, asks about the inherent chasm between the human person and the divine in the encounter with God: “how can we stand in the presence of the divine source of all energy and power in the universe?” To emphasize his point, he surprisingly quotes the *Bhagavad Gita* on human smallness before the divine: “Suppose a thousand suns were to arise tomorrow in the sky?” God’s infinite greatness remains beyond human understanding, creating an abyss between the human person and God. However, unlike Berkovits, classical Hindu commentators believe that this gap can be bridged on a personal level through meditation and enlightenment. Furthermore, for the Hindu the infinite divine takes on manifestations to help bridge the gap.^[12]

HINDU AFTERLIFE

Rabbi Menashe ben Israel (1604–1657), the important seventeenth-century Jewish leader of the age of exploration declared: “The belief in reincarnation is a firm belief for our entire congregation, and none are to be found disputing it . . . it is a true belief and one of the fundamental principles of the Torah that solves the problem of a righteous person who suffers.”^[13]

In contrast to Menashe ben Israel’s developed kabbalistic view of reincarnation, the anthropologist Lawrence Babb points out that Hindus’ belief in reincarnation, the fate of the spirit after death, is generally quite vague and consists mainly of being rewarded for one’s deeds, since everything is measured against *dharma*. In short, average Hindus do not know much about the afterlife, but assume that one will be rewarded and punished based on one’s ethics.^[14]

If there is a useful way to discuss the issue it is to remember not to make Hindus exotic and Judaism contemporary. Premodern Jews and Hindus had extensive views of the afterlife, while contemporary urban members of both faiths focus on this world. Modern Hindus are not ancient texts and pre-modern Jewish texts such as Menashe ben Israel do not reflect contemporary Jewish belief.

In the past, Western accounts of Hinduism generally reflected this basic question of Christian missionaries: What corresponds to salvation through Christ? They concluded that it was liberation from reincarnation, so they could now proceed to compare the two faiths based on this sharp divide. In contrast, most Jews and Hindus are more focused on worldly ethical action, ritual, and family than on salvation from Original Sin and the Fall.

Important Passages on Death

For Hindus, death is nobly referred to as the great journey where one receives a vision of light as one enters the next phase of existence. A Vedic funeral hymn asking for eternal life with God intones: “Where eternal luster glows, the realm in which the light divine is set, place me, Purifier, in that deathless, imperishable world. Make me immortal in that realm where movement is accordant to wish, in the third region, the third heaven of heavens, where the worlds are resplendent” (*Rig Veda*, Aitareya Aranyaka 6–11). Elsewhere, the Vedas echo the Psalmist and Isaiah, in asking that the

deceased be lead “from darkness to light, and from death to immortality.”^[15]

The Upanishads, like the Bible, see death as a natural part of life. “When a person comes to weakness, be it through old age or disease, he frees himself from these limbs just as a mango, a fig or a berry releases itself from its stalk” (Sukla Yajur Veda, *Brihadharanyaka Upanishad*: 4.3.36). However, in contrast to the Bible, Hinduism is more accepting of death since death and rebirth is certain; one should not grieve over an inevitable fact (*Gita* ch. 2 verse 27). Death is merely a transition, unlike in the Bible and the Talmud, which portray a sense of grief, finality, and loss. Yet, Judaism also has had those who speak of death as a kiss, as mild as removing a hair from milk (Berakhot 8a).

This naturalism and quest for an afterlife continues in the *Bhagavad Gita*, which states: “As the embodied soul continually passes in this body from boyhood to youth to old age, the soul similarly passes into a new body at death. When the lessons of this life have been learned the soul leaves the physical body. A sober person is not bewildered by such a change” (2:12–13). Death becomes a spiritual opportunity for a level of detachment in our search for the divine self.

According to Babbs, popular notions of reward and punishment are ill-formed and contradictory, some think of hell, others think of rebirth in the 8.4 million types of reincarnation, including worms, and theological sophisticates think of the promises of the splendors of conjunction with the divine or a return into the divine. Nevertheless, he notes there is wide agreement that the consequences of evil deeds are circumvented by ritual, especially charity, good deeds, and fasts. In this, it is not very different from Judaism.

Before going any further, there is one important statement to be made. There is no one single Hindu view of the afterlife and each philosophy and denomination has its own view.

Reincarnation

Westerners assume that the concept of reincarnation (*punar-janma*) is an essential tenet and focus point for Hindus, but it is more complex. The

Hindu discussion starts with the premise that the individual soul is caught in a cycle of rebirth until all necessary karmas are created and resolved and its essential unity with God is fully realized. Every karma produces a result that must be experienced in either this or some future life. As long as the soul is enveloped in ignorance, it remains attached to material desires and subject to the cycles of births and deaths (*samsara*).

Hindu thought provides several theological reasons for reincarnation. There are two reasons, which were initially formulated by *Nyaya* and contained in most contemporary works. The first is that rebirth explains why one person is a king and another one a pauper. The second is it is necessary to experience the fruits of one's karmas—that one's actions have to have consequences. Other reasons include the idea that some souls are still lusting and desirous of more material pleasures. This unending craving to satisfy one's desires causes the soul to assume a new physical body. A theistic answer is that in order to attain liberation, one needs to return to attain the grace and compassion of God or a God-realized guru.

The *Mimamsa* school, however, gives karma from past lives a negligible role and disregards the concern with liberation from rebirths. Rather, a pious keeper of the law expects his reward and punishment based on one's actions during life.

The Yoga school also considers karma from past lives to be secondary; one's behavior and quest for perfection in the current life is what has consequences, specifically a conjunction with the infinite as a divine self. In many ways, it is similar to the Jewish sage Maimonides's views that only personal perfection lets one attain conjunction with the divine.

Rabbi Norman Lamm, former president of Yeshiva University, relates that once he had visited India and met with the Bene Israel. They had had one important question for him that they asked several times: "Rabbi, do we Jews believe in reincarnation?" Lamm answered—knowing full well that much of Kabbalah, philosophy, and even Midrash does accept the notion of reincarnation—with a clear, "no, we Jews do not believe in reincarnation." He claims that he has said this since, and in his estimation reincarnation is perhaps the central tenant of Hinduism—the Bene Israel's host culture; they need to remain separate from their Hindu neighbors while still living in an integrated way among them. [\[16\]](#)

Among the data that Lamm leaves out is that many early Christian and Muslim authors assume that most early medieval Jews accepted reincarnation. In the High Middle Ages, it became the divide between philosophers and kabbalists, in that the philosophers Saadyah and Maimonides rejected reincarnation while most Kabbalists accepted it. From the thirteenth century until the eighteenth century, Jews generally assumed that they were likely destined for two or three rebirths; this included legal authorities such as Rabbi Yosef Karo, the author of the *Shulkhan Arukh*, the classic work on Jewish law as well as the Vilna Gaon (d. 1797).

Chaim Vital (d. 1620) expresses an expansive view: “As long as a person is unsuccessful in his purpose in this world, the Holy One, blessed be He, uproots him and replants him over and over again (*Zohar* I 186b). “Behold, after a person’s death, he is repaid for his sins . . . he can be reincarnated as a mineral, vegetable, animal or person” (The Gate of Reincarnations).

Afterlife

For those Hindus who are theists with clear divine and human distinctions, the afterlife sounds more like the Western heaven. For example, some dvaita schools perform worship with the goal of spending eternity in a spiritual world or heaven (*loka*) in the blessed company of the Supreme Being.

In Siddha Shaivism, the Shaivism of the average householder, if a soul is meritorious in its ritual and devotional preparation, it receives divine grace and is given an afterlife in which it contemplates divinity for eternity. The soul carries with it the mental impressions it received during its earthly life, as the karma of the soul. The wise understand the need for making amends of a self-inflicted karma or prepayment of an anticipated punishment for a previous action. Penance includes giving money to priests, or to temples, since pilgrimage is needed to dissolve painful karmas and refine joyous karmas. The leaders advocate that all their members perform religious practices regularly; they make a pilgrimage once a year to a holy place; and they see to the needs of relatives, guests, holy persons, and the poor in order to circumvent the creation of new burdensome and painful karmas.

In a similar but not identical manner, Vaishnavaites generally follow Ramanuja, who taught an afterlife of eternal joy of contemplation of

the divine. Krishna followers who stress the devotional aspects teach that love of Krishna and chanting his name will let one attain a paradise where one is eternally in the presence of Krishna. Swaminarayan members teach that the liberated soul resides in Bhagwan's divine abode, Akshardham, where it eternally experiences the divine bliss while still maintaining an individual identity.

Dvaita heaven sounds similar to the Talmudic vision of the afterlife in which the righteous take pleasure from the divine splendor. As in Judaism, the debate on the nature of God's role and the conjunction with the divine ranges from naturalistic conjunction to theistic gift, to mystical presence. Maimonides imagines a merging in cognitive consciousness, while Nahmanides imagines a spiritual or ethereal body of light.

Advaitan

According to the *advaitan* teacher Shankara, the world, as we ordinarily understand it, is fleeting and illusory. Ignorance (*avidya*) of one's true self leads to a perpetual chain of reincarnation. Through spiritual practice, a person realizes that the true self is the immortal soul, not the body or the ego. All desire for the pleasures of the world will vanish, since these pleasures will seem insipid compared to spiritual bliss. When all desire has vanished, the person will not be born again. Followers of the *Advaita Vedanta* school believe they will spend eternity absorbed in the perfect peace and happiness of the realization that all existence is One *Brahman*, of which the soul is part.

Swami Nikhilananda (1895–1973), founder of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York, presents the *advaitan* approach in terms familiar to students of Kabbalah. He taught that there are two ways to view the nature of the soul from two standpoints: absolute or transcendental, and relative or phenomenal; this distinction corresponds to the kabbalistic distinction found in both Rabbis Schneur Zalman of Liadi and Chaim of Volozhin of absolute view and human view (*Mizido Mizidanu*).

For Swami Nikhilananda, from the absolute standpoint, the soul's true nature is non-dual, immortal, ever pure, ever free, ever illumined, and one with *Brahman*. This realization is the goal of human spiritual aspiration and striving. The same real soul, under the spell of ignorance, appears as the apparent human identified with the body, mind, and senses.

From the relative standpoint, the *Vedanta* philosophy admits the existence of a multitude of individual souls that are distinguished from the Supreme Soul. Entangled in the world, the soul seeks deliverance from the eternal round of birth and death through performing virtuous or sinful deeds; for the *advaitan* position, rewards and punishments are spoken of only with reference to the apparent soul.

The twentieth-century *advaitan* Sri Ramana Maharshi downplayed both rebirth and heaven. When he was asked, "Is reincarnation true?" he replied: "Reincarnation exists only so long as there is ignorance. There is really no reincarnation at all, either now or before. Nor will there be any hereafter." He continued: "Some claim that the soul goes to heaven or hell while others claim that it is reincarnated in a new body." Instead, he told his eager listeners that all such concepts are based on the false assumption that the individual self is real. "Once this illusion is seen through, the whole superstructure of after-life theories collapses. From the standpoint of the Self, there is no birth or death, no heaven or hell, and no reincarnation." Maharshi offered an even sharper rejection of the Western image of Hinduism when asked: "What happens to a person after death?" To which Maharshi answered: "Engage yourself in the living present. The future will take care of itself."^[17]

Puranas

In the *Garuda Purana*, an important Vaishnava *Purana*, Krishna teaches Garuda, King of the Birds, about death and the ethical life. People who do not lie, do not exploit nature, and have faith in God get a peaceful death. Those who avoid lust, jealousy, hatred, and follow the *dharma* get a peaceful death. While those who are full of lure, lust, and attachment get trapped at the time of their death. Krishna further says that due to good and bad karmic actions, the soul gets reincarnated in various forms like humans,

animals, birds, or plants. The habitual sinner suffers extremely while going through various hells, where suffering is inflicted upon the soul depending upon its karma, and only when those karmas are repaid, the soul gets another life on earth.

Rebirth as an animal is only found in the *Puranas*—not among the philosophers—in which each person endures 8,400,000 different births. These births include all of the phyla in the animal and plant kingdoms, before the soul attains a human form.

According to the *Puranas*, the soul will be asked about its evil deeds and what it plans to do about them. To which the soul answers, that relatives will perform expiations on my behalf to free me from punishments. Then it is said that the soul returns to the earth on the twelfth day to see whether or not the body has been burnt according to the ritual expiations.

Judaism has equivalents to the Puranic texts, like the tractates of *Mourning Rabbati*, *Gan Eden* and *Gehenna*. The early medieval *Midrash Kohen* describes paradise in ways that are foreign to modern Jewish ears. “The Gan ‘Eden at the east measures 800,000 years (at ten miles per day or 3,650 miles per year). There are five chambers for various classes of the righteous. The first is built of cedar, with a ceiling of transparent crystal. . . . The second is built of cedar, with a ceiling of fine silver” (1:2).

These premodern Jewish trends continued until they reached their peak in the seventeenth century among baroque Jewry, with Rabbi Ahron Berachia’s elaborate work, the *Maavar Yabok*, which is a lengthy Jewish book of the dead with full descriptions of the experience of the soul and the body from the deathbed into the various heavens. [\[18\]](#)

Neo-Vedanta

Finally, the twentieth century Neo-Hindu thinkers Dayananda and Vivekananda surprisingly chose to stress Hindu ideas of reincarnation as a key teaching of Hinduism, which is not a Vedic or Upanishad concept according to many scholars. Vivekananda emphasized that reincarnation is a universal truth known to all ancient people. According to him, “the greater portion of the human race having organized religion . . . believe in the idea of pre-existence of the Soul . . . the Greek philosophers made it the

cornerstone of their philosophy.” However, for Vivekananda, the most important point is that reincarnation first arose in India, among a people that “spent the best part of its energies” on the science of the soul.^[19]

In addition, Swami presented reincarnation as the true doctrine of Judaism and Christianity. The “Alexandrian Jews imbued with the doctrine of an Individual Soul, and the Pharisis [sic] of the time of Jesus . . . believed in its wanderings through various bodies; and thus it is easy to find how Christ was recognized as the incarnation of an older prophet,” namely, Elijah.^[20]

BHAKTI

Bhakti yoga is a spiritual path or practice within Hinduism focused on the cultivation of love and devotion toward God, motivated by the sincere, loving desire to please God rather than by the hope of divine reward or the fear of divine punishment. *Bhakti* is an all-absorbing religious passion that takes place at the personal, experiential, or the mystical level.^[21]

Similar to *dharma* or *yoga*, the term *bhakti* encompasses a range of meanings including attachment, devotion to, fondness for, faith or love, or worship. *Bhakti* especially refers to a devotee’s devotion and the love of a personal god or a representational god. These concepts are similar to their Jewish counterparts of love of God, service to God, lovesickness, cleaving to God, and enthusiasm.

The eleventh-century Shaivite poet, Basavanna, writes of *bhakti* as a kind of experience, dominated by a high degree of emotional intensity, even to the point of pain. The chief features of the passionate devotion for God are its spontaneity and its transference of human relations and emotions to God. It presupposes the theory of the manifestation of God as human, which makes it possible to think of God in human relations and in human ways. The *Bhagavata Purana* tells us that without *bhakti* the world becomes purposeless, unpoetic, and emotionally dead. Indeed, God is imagined to be so near to us that we can look upon Him and love Him with the love of a very dear friend, or with the devotion and the intensity of the love for a spouse. Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), wrote that “*Bhakti*-Yoga is a real, genuine search after the Lord, a search beginning, continuing, and ending in love. One single moment of the madness of extreme love to God brings us

eternal freedom.”^[22]

Because relatively few Hindus have read the complex theological classics of Hinduism, *bhakti* serves as the vehicle for such religious doctrines at the popular level. Often, *bhakti* expresses these doctrines through image and myth; presenting the idea of a participatory divinity partially embodied in the universe. *Bhakti* poetry uses everyday imagery and the familiar language of ordinary people.

History—Older and Newer Views

According to twentieth-century textbooks, the *bhakti* movement originated in the seventh century in Tamil Nadu and spread northwards through India. During the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, a great *bhakti* movement swept through India, initiated by a loosely associated group of teachers or saints (*sants*). It promoted the belief that *moksha* was attainable by everyone. Initially, *bhakti* was considered unorthodox, as it rebelled against caste distinctions and disregarded Brahmanic rituals, which the *bhakti* saints said were not necessary for salvation. They taught that people could cast aside the subtle complexities of philosophy and simply express their overwhelming love for God. The movement is related to Islamic Sufism, which appeared around the same time.

In contrast, contemporary scholarship presents the *bhakti* movement as neither a rebellion against either Brahmins or the Sanskrit language. Rather, they now characterize *bhakti*'s reemergence in medieval India as a revival, reworking and recontextualization of the central themes of the Vedic traditions, a continuation and expression of ideas found in earlier works; they also emphasize that there are no singular origins in South India traveling north, rather, it likely simultaneously developed in the north as well.

One could compare this shift in scholarship to that on the Hasidic leader, Rabbi Yisroel ben Eliezer (known as the Baal Shem Tov, c. 1700–1760). Early twentieth-century works portrayed the Baal Shem Tov and the early Hasidic movement as a romantic revolt against rabbinic authority that emphasized joy, singing, comradeship, and prayer. These accounts created stories of how the Baal Shem Tov was a friend of the common person, even

if unlettered, uncommitted, or an outcast. However, in the twenty-first century, we treat these tales as themselves works of modern romanticism and acknowledge that the Baal Shem Tov was based on prior pietistic forms, was part of the elite rabbinic establishment, strict about ritual observance, and did not reject the Talmud.

Bhakti Movement

In many regions during the medieval period, these new *bhakti* forms of spiritual leadership produced community singing, communal chanting of deity names, festivals, pilgrimages, and rituals. Many of these regional practices have lasted through the modern era creating a popular religion of community singing, chanting of deity names, festivals, pilgrimages, and public rituals.

In addition, the *bhakti* movement introduced new forms of voluntary social giving such as *Seva* (service, for example to a temple or guru school or community construction), *Dāna* (charity), and community kitchens with free, shared food. *Bhakti* temples and monasteries adopted social functions, such as providing relief to natural disaster victims, helping the poor and marginal farmers, providing community labor, feeding houses for the poor, establishing free hostels for poor children, and promoting folk culture.

Women in *bhakti*, especially, speak of the obstacles of home, family tensions, the absent husband, meaningless household chores, and the restrictions of married life. Their new focus is utter devotion and worship of their Divine Husbands. While it is tempting to see women's participation within the *bhakti* movement as a revolt against the patriarchal norms of the time, there is little evidence to support this perspective. Women devotees were simply individuals attempting to lead lives of devotion by transferring their devotion and their duties as lovers or wives to their Divine Lover.

The *bhakti* movement saw two ways of imaging the nature of the divine *Brahman*: as *Nirguna Brahman*, the ultimate reality as formless, without attributes or quality and as *Saguna Brahman*, envisioned and personified with form, attributes and quality. The two had parallels in the ancient pantheistic unmanifest and theistic manifest traditions, respectively. For many, *bhakti* liberation cannot be solely achieved by mere human efforts, rather the help of one's personal god is essential in reaching liberation. At

points, this concept of salvation as a gift of the divine bears similarities to the Christian concept of grace.

Meera—Saguna Envisioned

Meera (also known as Mirabai, c. 1498) was a mystic poet, devotee of Krishna, and one of the most significant *sants* (saints) of the Vaishnava *bhakti* movement. She was a Rajput princess who was married into another princely family at a young age against her wishes. There were no children from this marriage, and Meera took no interest in her earthly spouse, since she believed herself to be married to Krishna. In 1521, her husband died in battle. Subsequently, she undertook a pilgrimage dancing from one village to another, until she covered almost the whole of North India. Meera considered the Varanasi mystic Ravidas to be her spiritual guru.

Meera's poetry tells of her vision of Lord Krishna when she was a child; from that point on, she vowed to forever be his bride. Some thirteen hundred poems, commonly known as *bhajans* (sacred songs), are attributed to her. They are popular throughout India and have been translated and published worldwide. In most of her poems, she describes her unconditional passionate love for her Lord Krishna. In Meera's poem, "Cowherding Girl," she imagines herself to be a cow herding girl at Gokul who is in love with Krishna, where her love transcends her low caste and her lack of book knowledge.

Ravidas—Nirguna Formless

Ravidas was a fifteenth-century north Indian guru mystic of the *bhakti* movement and one of the direct disciples of Ramanandi Sampradaya, one of the founders of the *bhakti* movement in Northern India. He was a socio-

religious reformer, a thinker, a theosophist, a humanist, a poet, a traveler, a pacifist, and a spiritual figure. His songs were also included in the Sikh scriptures.

Ravidas taught that every person has the right to worship God and read holy texts, all casts and low professions could reach God:

You are me, and I am You—what is the difference between us?
We are like gold and the bracelet, or water and the waves.
If I did not commit any sins, O Infinite Lord,
how would You have acquired the name, ‘Redeemer of sinners’?
You are my Master, the Inner-knower, Searcher of hearts.
The servant is known by his God, and the Lord and Master is known by His servant.
Grant me the wisdom to worship and adore You with my body.
O Ravi Daas, one who understands that the Lord is equally in all, is very rare.

I was in Varanasi, the center for the annual Ravidas celebration, watching thousands of ordinary people singing devotional songs at his shrine; I also witnessed a special open field assembly, and a candlelit processional through the city. Almost all the small shops and services closed for the day to be part of the festivities. It was an outpouring of devotion by ordinary people to the saint defending the lowly, unlearned forms of worship.

Bhakti in Judaism.

In the Bible, the Psalmist declared a *bhakti* style devotion: “Yes, I will behold You in Your holy place. Oh, to see your might and your glory [. . .] Thirsty is my soul for You; yearning is my body for You” (Psalm 63). So too, in the Middle Ages, the poet Yehdah Halevi left an ideal example of a *bhakti* poem in his, Where, Lord, will I find you:

I sought your nearness. With all my heart I called you.
And in my going out to meet you, I found you coming toward me,
as in the wonders of your might and holy I saw you.
Who would say he hasn’t seen your glory as the heavens’
hordes declare their awe of you without a sound being heard?

An equally famous devotional Jewish love poem to God is Yedid Nefesh, authored by mystic Elazar Azikri in sixteenth-century Safed.

Beloved of my soul, Merciful Father,

Draw your servant after your will
Your servant would run swift as a deer
To kneel before Your splendor
For Your love is sweeter to him
Than honey nectar and all pleasing savor.

Exalted Glorious Beautiful Light of the World
My soul is love-sick for You
Please My God, please heal her
By showing her the beauty of Your radiance
Then she will be strengthened and healed
And she shall have eternal joy [alt. and she shall be your eternal maidservant].

In this poem, the path of the Jewish mystic soul contains three elements: love, compassion, and surrender. God, as the lover, shows how to practice and experience love; God, as parent, offers divine compassion; mystics envision God as the master and their souls as maidservants, so they can practice complete surrender.

The Baal Shem Tov and his followers exhort Hasidim to remember God at all times and to seek absorption in the infinite. The Hasidic movement was about enthusiasm, emotionally enflamed praying and singing, and devotionally offering the heart to God. Almost anything currently known as *baqashot* and *piyyut* would fit into the *bhakti* category as well.

Radha and Krishna

The love of Radha, the beautiful *gopi*, and Krishna, the youthful dark deity who is the object of widespread devotion, is less a written story than a succession of episodes seen and heard in images, plays, songs, and dances. For centuries, their depiction is as lovers in separation and union, longing and abandonment. The story is continuously performed in every new imaginative form of dance or communal singing; sometimes, devotees feel compelled to get up and ecstatically dance as the Lord or his beloved. [\[23\]](#)

The twelfth-century Sanskrit poet, Jayadeva, decisively shaped the legend's outlines as a passionate love, in his *Gita Govinda*. It presents a lyrical account of the illicit springtime love affair between Krishna and Radha, a god and goddess manifested on earth as a cowherd and milkmaid. The poem celebrates the vicissitudes of carnal love and the transports of religious devotion, merging and reconciling those realms of emotion and

experience. While sensually engaged, it is at the same time devoted to Krishna as Lord of the Universe. [\[24\]](#)

The biblical book Song of Songs is very similar to the Krishna description of God's form: "My beloved is white and ruddy. . . . His head is as the finest gold, his locks are bushy, and black as a raven. His eyes are as the eyes of doves by the rivers of waters, washed with milk, and fitly set. His cheeks are as a bed of spices, as sweet flowers; his lips like lilies, dropping sweet smelling myrrh. . . . His legs are as pillars of marble, set upon sockets of fine gold" (Song of Songs 5:10–15).

A pious Hindu only needs to close his or her eyes in order to see Vrindavan, the Hindu equivalent to the Garden of Eden, where the love occurred. In the falling dusk, Nanda, Krishna's foster father and the chief of a community of cowherds, asks Radha to escort Krishna home through the forest. On the way, their secret passion triumphs in a grove. Radha's thoughts are absorbed by Krishna who, however, is unfaithful to her as he sports with other *gopis*—hugging one, kissing another, and caressing yet another dark beauty. Radha is jealous as she imagines his arms around a thousand *gopis*, but more than jealousy, she feels deserted by her lover. She grieves, feels betrayed, and yearns for passion lost.

The power of Radha's yearning produces a change in Krishna. Of all the interchangeable *gopis*, Radha starts to stand out in Krishna's mind as someone special who is desired in her uniqueness. Krishna becomes the romantic lover impelled toward a singly unheeding pursuit of pleasure. Krishna has become a man for whom his partner's well-being assumes an importance that easily equals his own. He discovers that he would rather serve and adore than vanquish and demand. As a tale of love, this transformative moment from desire's sensations to love's adoration gives the story of Radha and Krishna its singular impact.

To continue the tale, hearing of Krishna's remorse and of his attachment to her, Radha, dressed and ornamented for love, awaits Krishna at their trysting place in the forest. She lingers in vain, for Krishna does not come. Radha is consumed with jealousy as she imagines him engaged in an amorous encounter with a rival. When Krishna finally does appear, Radha spurns him angrily. However, in separation, Radha and Krishna long for one another with a mounting sense of desolation. Eventually, Radha's friend

persuades her to abandon her modesty and pride and go to her lover.

In the full throes of a sexual excitement when even her “modesty left in shame,” Radha rushes to meet an equally ardent lover. Krishna sings: “Throbbing breasts aching for loving embrace are hard to touch. Rest these vessels on my chest! Quench love’s burning fire! Narayana [Krishna] is faithful now. Love me, Radhika!” (Gita Govinda XII.5).

The crossing of forbidden boundaries is central to an adequate understanding of Radha’s *bhakti*. This plays itself out in the transgression of moral and legal limits in the illicit relationship of Radha and Krishna, a theme accentuated by the intense yearning of *viraha* (love in separation). Furthermore, the intimacy of the *bhakti* relationship by the male *bhakta* experiencing himself as the female partner violates his primal sexual demarcation as a male.

Later poets, notably Vidyapati in the fifteenth century, who sought to further increase the passion of the story, gave the illicit element in the story, a more concrete cast by portraying Radha as another man’s woman, and her liaison with Krishna as adulterous. Radha and Krishna are not figures of erotic allegory for mystical love. Rather, *bhakti* extols possessing and being possessed by God with sexual love as the closest analogue. Radha is simply the personification of *mahabhava*, the great emotional state that ignores social proprieties and is unbounded by conventions. Radha’s passionate love of Krishna, raised to its highest intensity, is not an allegory for religious passion—it is religious passion.

A formal debate to decide whether Radha was licit or adulterous was held in 1717 at the Court of Nabak Jafara Khana, and those advocating the adulterous position won. The prevailing argument was that *bhakti* must be passionate and that an adulterous relationship creates greater passion than a licit one. In the nineteenth century, modern Krishna followers downplayed the Radha veneration and almost entirely removed the forbidden and transgressive elements.

Jewish Devotional Love

The allegorical biblical Song of Songs betrays some of the same emotions: “Come! Be swift my lover! Be like a gazelle, or a wild young stag! Come! Play on the spicy mountain!” (Song of Songs 8:14). Yet, although the

Jewish tradition treats the Song of Songs as an analogy for the relationship between the soul and God, as an extraordinary intimacy between God and human beings, it is not a source of public performances leading to actual rapture.

Yisrael Najara (1550–1625) was the one Jewish religious poet whose invocations of passionate love of God were as fervent as those of *bhakti* literature because of Ottoman Sufi influence. His poems promote the use of devotional and erotic hymns and are still sung to the *Shekhinah* in Middle Eastern Jewish communities before sunrise with realistic feeling of passionate emotions. Najara's devotee passionately asks the *Shekhinah*, "Why do you open your eyes?" Asking why the *Shekhinah* leaves the earthly lover to a love-sickness, after being enthralled in love after a night of sexual pleasure, and then expresses the subsequent fear of the loss of the beloved. Najara also authored the marriage contract read by Ottoman Jews on Shavuot as they lead themselves to the *Shekhinah*: "May the Bridegroom rejoice with the bride whom He has taken as His lot and may the bride rejoice with the Husband of her youth while uttering words of praise."^[25]

The only clear adulterous love in Jewish piety is in the Bible itself, which narrates the story of Hosea's adulterous wife as a moral lesson of how God's love toward faithless Israel works. "Then the Lord told me, 'Love your wife again, even though she is loved by others and has committed adultery. Love her as I, the Lord, love the Israelites, even though they have turned to other gods and love to eat raisin cakes'" (Hosea 3:1). The story is an unforgettable picture of God's strong, unending love for His covenant people; God continued to love them and did not abandon His covenant with them.

Some Jewish commentators, such as David Kimhi (also known as RaDaK, 1160–1235), believed that Hosea's adulterous marriage is only a prophetic allegory invented by Hosea to illustrate the love of God. However, some rabbis took Hosea's marriage with this harlot as having happened literally (Pesahim 87a). Nevertheless, the more important difference between Hindu *bhakti* and Jewish practice is that, Jewish popular devotion has never created a *bhakti* popular festival where people make up their faces like harlots and seek rapture in God as a way of preparing to love God or to seek his atonement.

The story in Hosea shows a tension between the covenantal

faithfulness to the moral God of the Bible with the primal need to play harlot in order to follow the fertility gods who provide for the fertility of the earth. Hinduism would not have given such a zero-sum choice.

In the biblical story, when God again espouses His bride Israel, He gives her for dowry the virtues: righteousness, justice, grace, mercy and faith; by means of these virtues, He reunites Himself with the bride. This Jewish conclusion stresses the bilateral ethical relationship between God and the human person rather than the *bhakti* erotic conclusion.

NOTES

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Chapter 6

Godliness

AVATARA AND EMANATION

Do Hindus think their images and statues are separate gods? The short answer is no. Everyone knows that there is a unified God behind everything. But the long answer is more complex.

According to scholar Klaus K. Klostermaier, the author of the reigning textbook on Hinduism, “if questioned about the many gods, even illiterate villagers will answer: *bhagwan ek hai*, the Lord is One.” Klostermaier continues, “They may not be able to figure out in theological terms how the many gods and the One God hang together and they may not be sure about the hierarchy among the many manifestations, but they know that ultimately there is only One and that the many somehow merge into the One.”^[1] This chapter attempts to give readers the tools needed to understand a unifying God.

Denominations

The organization of worship from 650 CE to 1100 CE became the basis for the various Hindu denominations, including the Shaivites, Smarta, and Vaishnavites. Shaivites accept only one Lord God, Shiva, the high God who can only be worshiped by an abstract or aniconic stone pillar. All other images are just personifications of His attributes or lower household spirits. Smarta considers that only the monism of *Brahman* is real. Images of gods are only sensory representations needed for humans to focus during rituals and devotional practices. The swamis at the Hindu-Jewish encounters presented this opinion, some of the rabbis assumed that this was the only Hindu theological position. For Smarta, “There is no likeness of Him” (*Svetasvatara Upanishad* 4:19).

The religion of Vaishnavas is where the real questions of monotheism and many deities are best explained. How do they speak of many *avatars* and gods? Vaishnavites consider Vishnu to be the Supreme God who

incorporates many of the deities from 200 BCE to 650 CE as different forms of Vishnu. They consider the originally separate cults of Naharayan, Ram, and Krishna as forms of Vishnu.

Pancharatra

How do Vaishnavites relate *Brahman* to the many deities and *avatars*? They have a variety of complex emanation schemes or systems of forms. I will examine one complex emanation scheme of the Agamic literature, especially as found in the *Pancharatra* (final editing 650–850 CE), a vast collection of texts usually published under separate titles such as the *Laksmi Tantra* or the *Ahimbudhnaya Samhita*.^[2]

There are many other Hindu metaphysical schemes in addition to the Pancharatra, including the approaches of Madhva, Vallabha, and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. I do not mean to say that all Hindu systems accept the Pancharatra, but the full schema of the Pancharatra system allows for a clear presentation and comparison to Judaism.

The *Pancharatra* presents how the Absolute Divine, the *Parabrahman*, becomes manifest through five descending structures or five forms of *avata*: Para, Vyūha, Vibhava, Antaryāmin, and Archa.

Before we start, it would help to try to see these five manifestations in what they correspond to in Jewish theology: (1) Kabbalistic *Keter-Eyn Sof*, or the God manifest as the cause of causes; (2) the *sefirot*; (3) manifestations as the *Shekhinah* or divine throne; (4) images of deities (forbidden in Judaism), and (5) God in the soul and God immanent in the natural order.

The first three levels of *Eyn Sof*, *sefirot*, and *Shekhinah* are the basis of Kabbalah; yet, Judaism limits such concepts solely as literary ideas but would not make representational versions of these manifestations. The fourth level of the divine is to worship in images, which Judaism completely rejects. The fifth level is found in Hasidut and emphasizes God in the soul and divine immanence; I will return to this scheme at the end of the chapter. I must note, however, that those readers who find Kabbalah impenetrable, recondite, and not part of contemporary Judaism, will find this chapter equally trying. However, those with an understanding of Kabbalah, will recognize a common emanation theism.

Five Levels

For a Vaishnava, *Brahman* is the Supreme Being, an absolute form of *Brahman* (*Parabrahman*) without any qualities or attributes, the eternal unmanifest supreme aspect of the divine. Alternately, and more commonly, Vaisnavas generally believe that the highest Brhaman is Narayana. This absolute form makes itself known through five aspects of *avatars*. What is an *avatara*? The prefix “ava” means “down” and the verb “tar” means the “move.” It is important to note that the theory of *avatara* is to explain how the Absolute can be manifest into the senses for humans to see; it is not a Christian divination of the human or incarnation of the divine, so I avoid the word incarnation whose literal meaning is to be made flesh.

Para *Brahman*—is that of Para (Absolute or Supreme), known as the Narayana, the Vedic Supreme God or also known as Vishnu and Hari. Narayana is the name of God in his infinite, all-pervading form, the resting place for all living entities. In this para or transcendental mode, the deity is like an ocean of nectar, altogether devoid of waves, rather quiet, profound, limitless, unfathomable, pure consciousness. Narayana creates unlimited universes and enters each one of them as Lord of Universe.

Digression on Lakshmi

In this system, Lakshmi is the consort of the transcendental form of Narayana, the energy or Sakti inseparable from Him. This energy is responsible for the origin, maintenance, and dissolution of the world. For this reason, the deity in the transcendental form is also referred to as Lakshmi—Narayana, or Sri Narayan—Sri means the auspicious. Lakshmi and Narayana are undifferentiated before creation in a waveless ocean of nectar. They are only differentiated by their subsequent activity.

She is both equal to Vishnu and subordinate, two sides of one reality: infinite divine or as the essential attribute of volition, energy, and action. Ramanuja, too, claims that Vishnu and Lakshmi are eternally associated and

asserts that both possess a multitude of unlimited energies. The precise relationship between Vishnu and Lakshmi was left insufficiently defined at the end of the classical period, and it remained for later generations to work out fuller accounts, which both respected Lakshmi's importance in rituals and devotional practices yet protected theism.

There were two major resolutions: the first is represented by Lokacarya (1213–1323) for whom the divine consort's role is subordinate and perhaps, ultimately, nonessential. Her ability to mediate between souls and their Lord is dependent on her relation to Vishnu. In other words, Sri Lakshmi mediates not as an equal partner of the Lord, but only as his dependent and subordinate.

In contrast, Venkatanatha (1268–1369) offers an alternative resolution, which distinguishes the two functions of the Lord and his consort, the Lord depicted as the father who disciplines the sinner, and Lakshmi as the divine mother who intercedes for him. In short, Venkatanatha preserves monotheism by denying that God and his divine consort are ontologically distinct.

Next Four Levels

Kabbalah also teaches that one does not directly worship the *Eyn Sof*, in that devotion is based on the manifestations of the *Eyn Sof* down through levels where the adept ascends the levels of the divine in the act of prayer.

Vyuha Avatara—The second level is *Vyuha*, which is the metaphysical manifestation similar to emanation of the *sefirot* as well as the channels and paths (*tzinorot venetivot*) of Kabbalah.

Vyuha means to arrange troops in a battle array, place in order. Lord Vishnu, the Supreme Being, comes into being through various forms and arrangements. The manifestation is multiplied as four actions, five senses, and six qualities that act through various channels, combinations, and harmonies. The *Vyuha Avatara* is the manifestation of the Supreme Being in four different forms known by the names of Vasudeva, Pradyumna, Samkaršana, and Anirudha. Each *vyuha* is conceived with certain specific attributes and functions such as creation, sustenance, dissolution of the universe, and promulgation of spiritual knowledge.

Vishnu is five-fold in internal aspects: *Narayana* (thinking), *Vasudeva*

(feeling), *Samkarsana* (willing), *Pradyumna* (knowing), and *Aniruddha* (acting), along with the six *gunas* (qualities)—*jnana* (omniscience), *aishvarya* (lordship), *shakti* (potency), *bala* (force), *virya* (virtue), and *tejas* (self-sufficiency), acting in pairs and in totality. In the Mahabharata and elsewhere, names are given to various specific formations of the above energies. Many *vyuhas* (battle formations) also take numerous forms, such as cart-shaped formation, womb-shaped formation, needle-shaped, crescent moon, crocodile, and eagle. Yogis relate these *vyuha* emanations to a pillar of light for the purpose of meditation who image them in red, yellow, and black.

Vibhava Avatara is the third type of *avatara*, the one best known in the West as *avatara*, as a manifestation of the Supreme Divine by assuming visual forms. This *avatara* has been mistakenly translated by many Christian works as incarnation rather than as manifestation or descents. The *vibhava avatara* constitutes the most important and most defining doctrines of Vaishnava theology in which *Brahman* manifests himself as specific gods known as *Ishwara*, with specific roles.

In the *Jayakhya Sarhhita*, one of the oldest Pancharatra treatises, it says that Narayana the Supreme Being assumes the bodies of human beings in order to uplift the human beings immersed in the ocean of bondage out of His compassion. All of God's manifestations, both direct ones as well as the indirect ones, take place out of His own will for the purpose of protection of devotees and destruction of evil. The number of such manifestations is considered to be infinite, but the *Sattvata Samhita*, the oldest *Pancharatra* text, enumerates thirty-nine as important *avataraas* and a later text, *Visvaksena Samhita* mentions thirty-six *avataraas*.

Three types of *vibhava avataraas* are distinguished: (1) direct manifestation of the deity's nature, such as Rama; (2) a lesser manifestation in which the deity's attributes are manifest in divine and human beings and finally, (3) where only a specific aspect or weapon of the deity manifests itself to carry out the deity's will. Only the first one is worshipped, but honor is given to the other two.

One should not be mistaken here in assuming that the Supreme Being Himself directly takes *avataraa*; that is a Puranic literary conception. The *Pancharatra Samhitas* nowhere maintain that the Supreme Being, laying aside its transcendent, unmoving nature assumes these finite forms. This is

impermissible by the premises of the system. The Supreme Being is unmanifest. The avataric bodies assumed during manifestation are of spiritual character and therefore, they are not defiled by any kind of defects.

Arca Avatara—the term “arca” refers to idol or *murti* worship. Idols are generally made of metal or stone as well as wood, according to the choice of the individual devotee on the pattern of any manifested forms of Vishnu. These are duly consecrated according to the religious rites prescribed for the purpose by the *Agamas*. As mentioned elsewhere in this book, the Vedas did not foster worship to statues. In response to the prayers of the devotees, God, who is omnipresent and has a loving disposition toward His devotees, condescends to be present in those idols by infusing into them His Divinity. The image has no independent power. This concept of God infusing images has no parallel in Judaism and in fact considers it forbidden.

The *Sattvata Samhita*, the oldest Pancharatra text, says that God, by way of assuming a divine body in the form, enters into it, thereby becoming indistinguishable from the manifestation. Hence, the idol becomes sanctified with the divine presence in it. In the Vaishnava archa worship, the devotee feels the very presence of God in it. As such, the inanimate image soon acquires a new meaning, becomes the object of love, of the heart’s hankering, and of the eye’s rest. Yet, the *Agamas*, such as *Vishnu-Samhita*, explicitly states that idols are a mere help, though a very necessary one, for the worshiper to conceive and meditate on God. This archa *avataraa* worship of statues by the Vaishnava is different from the *pratima* statue worship of the Smarta. In the latter, the statue is a symbol, the locus on which the devotee concentrates his thought; however, no sooner is the thought centralized, the locus soon gets out of his vision.

Antaryami Avataraa—this is the fifth kind of manifestation, that of God in the heart or immanence in the world. Antaryami is an indwelling in the inner recess of human hearts for the purposes of meditation. Alternately, it is the indwelling spirit of the Supreme Being, immanent in all sentient as well as non-sentient entities in the universe. The *Taittiriya Upanishad* refers to the heart as the abode of the Supreme Lord and teaches that since the divine can be found in the human heart, then a great person can be considered a manifestation of the divine. Holy men, ascetics, religious and political leaders, and great teachers can all be considered divine.

Emanation in Judaism

Returning to the original question about emanation in Judaism: How does this compare to Jewish emanations?

Consider the Kabbalah of Rabbi Moses Cordovero, for example; the *Eyn Sof* or unlimited infinite is the hidden God or innermost being of God without attributes or qualities. Because it lacks attributes, the *Eyn Sof* is incomprehensible and thus, in a strict sense, non-personal (although it reveals itself as personal). The hidden God manifests itself in the top three *sefirot* as will and wisdom. In the pseudonymous Hai Gaon writings, we have “three hidden lights” which are “Pure Thought,” “Knowledge,” and “Intellect.” Within the *Eyn Sof*, a triad exists in the hidden Godhead itself.

In turn, the top three manifest as the ten *sefirot*, divine spheres or realms, or as stages in his self-manifestation. This in turn creates the *kavod* of God known in texts as the personified Holy One blessed be He, the *Shekhinah*, and the divine throne. Unlike Hinduism, Jews do not tell personified stories about these personified aspects as separate deities nor does it visually present them. Judaism does not acknowledge the fourth level. Jews by definition are aniconic and will never use physical icons or make statues. Judaism does, however, have elements of the fifth manifestation which represent that God is found within our souls or is immanent in the world around us.

Does Everyone Accept this Emanation Scheme?

Does everyone accept this very complex understanding of Hinduism? How can they understand it if I cannot?

In short, their affiliation with a denomination is a tacit acceptance of the theological tenets of that teaching. Just as they accept the rites, festivals, and deities of that group, they accept the instruction that they are given. No, they may not understand the scheme, but they have given it assent just as Catholics assent to their complex theology even if they have never fully understood it. In addition, these formal theologies are found in the Temple carvings, in song, and in details of practice.

Puranas

Does this include all other cases? No. The first exception is the *Puranas* filled with stories of the *avatars* in which the infinite Supreme Being is manifested as an *avatara*. For example, Vishnu is directly manifest on earth or *Brahman* becomes Krishna when he plays with the *gopis*. These stories entirely ignore the emanation system and in many popular versions present a polytheistic world in which there are many independent gods who can compete with each other.

Unlike the Christological conception of incarnation, however, the *avatara* conception of Puranic Hindu legends are free of theological dogmas. Most Hindus do not expect the stories of the *Puranas* to correspond to the formal theology of *Brahman* and Iswara God. Some of the denominational teachings make a point of rejecting the *Puranas* as theology.

I must note that surveys have shown that unaffiliated people of Hindu decent living in the West without any education of their own traditions consider the *Puranas* as literal and polytheistic similar to the uneducated literalism of the immigrant Jews at the start of the twentieth century who saw the Jewish tradition as primitive.

Nepal and Rural India

The next exception is the religion in places that are highly syncretic like Nepal and certain regions of India. The official religion of Nepal is Hinduism, but in actual practice, the people mix Hinduism, Buddhism, and local deities. They accept many deities and ghosts from the Buddhist pantheon as well as the traditional fertility gods. Unlike India, people openly speak in polytheistic terms.

One merchant that I met pointed to his gods of the rice crop and his god to ward off malaria in the same breath as his Hindu and Buddhist gods.

They accept Dhyani Buddhas for the elements of the world as well as the Buddhist rain god. They also accept Vajrayana deities from Tibet, such as the Dharmapalas and Yidams.

Axel Michaels, the important scholar of Hinduism, who did most of his fieldwork in Nepal, calls their religion polytheistic. He divides Nepalese Hinduism into the Vedic roots, the folk religion, and the sectarian denominations. He found the Nepalese practice more accommodating to folk religions than the stronger influence on the folk in India of denominational and theological works.^[3]

Vestigial Tribalism

The third exemption is the continuous presence of polytheistic tribal religion images. The classic Hindu era incorporated many of their prior religions into theist or monist Hinduism between 300–1300, but what of the polytheistic gods and practices that only entered Hinduism as late as the seventeenth or eighteenth century?

One example is the worship of Jagannath in the Indian state of Odisha and several other states. Jagannath is famous for their once a year festival when images are placed on a huge chariot (*rath*) and paraded for the Rath Yatra festival. In theory, the god Jagannath is considered a form of Vishnu or Krishna, so for the educated Vaishnava, this worship fits into the theory of this chapter.

Jagannath is worshipped in the un-Hindu manner as part of a triad of gods consisting of his brother Balabhadra and sister Subhadra. One worships several deities at the same time, unlike standard Hindu practice. The triad of siblings have different powers. Unlike other deities of the Hindu gods, the Jagannath idol does not represent the image of a human being. The icon of Jagannath is a carved and decorated wooden stump with large round eyes and stumps as hands along with the conspicuous absence of legs. The worship procedures, practices, sacraments, and rituals of Jagannath do not conform to those of classical Hinduism. In addition, the god's physical statue

is made of wood, which is an exception to common Hindu iconographic deities of metal or stone. Most scholars assume that Jagannath is an outgrowth of a local tribal tree deity.^[4]

Contemporary educated worshippers of Jagannath would declare themselves theistic in line with Vaishnava theology. Contemporary Krishna followers, especially ISKCON, have embraced Jagannath as a theistic form of Krishna, presenting the practice in purified form. Nevertheless, as an outsider looking in, this case, and those similar to it, still show elements of their origins outside the classic theist theological schemes. But when encountering similar cases of vestigial tribal practices among contemporary Christians and Muslims communities, especially in developing countries, few outsiders use the practices to reflect on the theology and ideas of the religion as a whole.

Advaitan Panentheism

Finally, modern *advaitan* positions as taught in some ashrams where everything is *Brahman* can paradoxically cause some of the biggest reactions against this emanation scheme. For them, it is not just that we know nothing about the emanations of *Brahman* but that these discussions of metaphysics are themselves mere distractions. For them, every leaf, every stone, and every breath is divine if we realize it; therefore, everything can be worshiped and used in worship. This panentheism is also found in many forms of *Visistadvaita*.

VISUALIZATION—DARSHAN

A Jewish professor of Kurdish origin recounted to me that when he was a child his mother used to wake him up to go to synagogue by calling him to see the face of the *Shekhinah*. He added: the open face of the Sefer Torah when it was raised and opened like a face. The vignette struck me; Jews generally do not pay attention to their own language of visual encounter

with God as part of daily religious life.

Contemporary Hindus, in contrast, look at forms of idols as a way to see God. Millions travel to temples that are not only difficult to reach but contain dense crowds of thousands of people trying to catch a glimpse of the idols (*murtis*). They wait in long lines just for this short glimpse into the eyes of the god or goddess. For many, this plays a greater role in their lives than traditional ritual worship (*puja*) or intellectual realization. The expression of satisfaction, serenity, and joy on the face of a devotee who has just completed *darshan* truly captures its essence.

Darshan

Darshan means auspicious sight in the sense of an instance of seeing or beholding and being seen or beheld at the same time. In this sense, *darshan* is “to see with reverence and devotion, an interaction in presence between devotee and God who is present in image or sculpture. *Darshan* is reflected in the abundance of the gods and goddesses that ornate temples throughout India. [\[5\]](#)

Indian religion seeks to bridge the gap between the visible and the invisible through images of the divine, an object where physical perception and imagination merge. As mentioned in the Upanishad chapter, *Brahman* has two forms: the invisible and the manifest. The invisible aspect transcends both name and form, but the manifest possesses name and form. A common term employed in thinking about Hindu images is *vigraha* (body) the form in which the gods are able to be understood by human minds. If one wants to see and understand the divine, one goes to an image. Even when immanent in the concreteness of an image, the full essence of the ultimate remains transcendent.

The *Bhagavad Gita* (4:11) states that “in whatever way they approach me, I will show favor.” The theologian Ramanuja commented on this by stating that God professed that He will appear by showing himself (*dashan*) in any image chosen by the people. The image is the very thing that allows one to come to God; it does not hinder one’s direct vision of God.

Diana Eck, a Harvard professor of Hinduism and author of the acclaimed book, *Darshan*, writes that the “central act of Hindu worship,

from the point of view of the lay person is to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with one's own eyes, to see and be seen by the deity." A worshipper fully accomplishes *darshan* when the divine image looks with anthropomorphic eyes at the beholder. "Beholding the image is an act of worship, and through the eyes one gains the blessings of the divine." God is extremely visible in temples and in natural places used for divine worship. According to Eck, "For most ordinary Hindus, the notion of the divine as invisible would be foreign indeed." When Hindus go to temple, they say that they are going for *darshan* to see the form of God. Hinduism is, in the words of Diana Eck, "an imaginative, 'image-making' religious tradition."^[6]

Sight is a metaphorical expression of the experience that God sees us, or more specifically, a state of experiencing a God-consciousness. At the moment of *darshan*, the entire focus of the devotee is absorbed in the image of the deity. For many pious Hindus, the main purpose in visiting various temples on a special pilgrimage to a major temple is to wait in line, sometimes for hours, for a *darshan* and when one's turn arrives—a chance to have a brief moment to look directly at the statue and in turn experience the statue looking back. In a certain sense, it is more important than the worship through the *puja* of ritual offering.

At the time of its installation, the eyes of the idol are ritually opened so that the deity may see its devotees—this is deemed a very powerful gaze. The text *Sarva devapratistha prakasa* is one of the commonly used manuals for the installation of life in Hindu statues. Essential to this ritual is a complex process of mental projection. Along with chanting the seed syllables, a live body is projected by an inner visualization specialist onto the statue in this ritual: "I remember you, the highest divinity, in the morning with the glow of the rays of the autumn moon, adorned with beads and earrings . . . having one thousand arms [shining] blue, distinguished with the divine weapons. I bow to you, in the morning, of infinite form."^[7]

When worshipping with sincerity, one can see divinity in any particular form that one may desire. As such, divinity is pure consciousness and it does not have a form, just as water can collect in any shaped vessel. The connection with the image opens the heart and bestows peace, blessings, boons, and divine energy. The power of visualization, or imagining

something as living and breathing, is essential to worshipping images in the Hindu traditions. In the absence of this imaginative process, images are merely stones. Indeed, the possibility of such a sight is given so much importance that some aniconic supports, such as Shivalingas, may be endowed with engraved eyes or decorated with clothes so that it may take on an anthropomorphic resemblance.

Hindus extend this sense of sight to holy men, saints, and teachers as well as inanimate objects, including visits to natural formations, rivers, and trees. The entire process gives Hinduism a sensory and tactile feel, not through iconography in the Western sense, but rather as a way to value sight and imagination.

This process of imagination is also shown in religious theater performances, especially in the Vaishnava tradition. A quite common form is the representation of deities by children during the all-night rituals to worship the goddess. At a certain point during the play, a young girl is brought in whose dress and posture make clear that she is meant to be a personification of the goddess. The assembled gathering steps forward one by one to bow before the image, give an offering and receive some *prasad* (sanctified food).

Judaism and Sight

The historian Heinrich Graetz wrote in 1846, “Paganism sees its god, Judaism hears Him.”^[8] The contemporary Jewish historian Rachel Neis notes that Jews not producing images is not the same as not seeing God and that in fact, some Jews have sought and seen God. The Psalmist yearns for a chance to see God’s face (43:3). In the Hebrew Bible, Moses, Isaiah, and Ezekiel see the Divine Presence seated on a throne supported by four fantastic creatures. The divine throne was a lower manifestation of God and this image of the throne served as a model for later Jewish writings to discuss visions of the divine; however, in Rabbinic Judaism, unlike Hinduism, the use of vision and imagination is seemingly limited to the biblical period or when the Temple stood.^[9]

In rabbinic thought: during the Exodus each person among the Israelites, including even the lowest maidservant, saw God’s glory at the Red

Sea in a clearer vision than did, afterward, prophets of the level of Ezekiel; wherefore they burst forth into the song, "This is my God" (Mek., Ex. 15:2).

So too, the Midrash *Pesikta dRav Kahana* (12:25) presents a *darshan* vision as the revelation at Sinai: "Rabbi Levi said: the Holy Blessed One appeared as icons which have faces in every direction, so that a thousand people can gaze at it, and it gazes back at each one. In the same way, when God spoke, each individual could say, 'To me the Word speaks!'" The importance of seeing God as an individualized icon—and in turn God sees each individual person—is probably one of the closest Jewish texts to the Hindu approach. Judaism generally limits the act of seeing God to the singular event of Sinai; it does not serve as a model for contemporary piety.

The Rabbinic Oral Law required all Jews to visit the Temple on festivals to see God and for Him to see the assembled. On some level, this was taken literally and was enough to exclude the blind from pilgrimage.

In a Talmudic story, Emperor Hadrian said to Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah: "I desire to behold your God." Rabbi Joshua explained to him that it was impossible. Despite this the emperor persisted. Finally, the rabbi relented and asked him to stand in a fixed gaze at the sun. The emperor found the sun's light too strong to behold. Triumphantly, the rabbi exclaimed: "If you admit that you are unable to look at the sun, which is only one of the ministering servants of the Holy Blessed One, how can you honestly expect to behold God, Whose existence is even more dazzling?" (BT Hullin 59b). In this story, the rabbi claims that God is too great to be seen yet he understands that one would want to see God.

The Hindu might very well agree with the story about not being able to see God as Lord (*maha-ishvara*), but then draw the conclusion that the ordinary worshiper would need sensory images that he could use, even if they only represent lower manifestations or specific divine powers. Jews, by contrast, generally do not often accommodate this need for a sensory focus or worship images of lower manifestations.

Rabbinic thought recognized the relationship of divine omnipresence and the occurrence of prophetic vision in a specific location. How can one reconcile Jeremiah's omnipresence of "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" (Jer. 23: 24) with Moses only seeing "from between the two cherubims" (Ex. 25:22). R. Meir answered by telling the questioner to look into two mirrors of different shapes and sizes saying, "Behold, your own figure appears

differently because the mirrors reflect it differently; how much more must the glory of God be mirrored differently by different human minds?"

(*Genesis Rabbah* iv. 3). Some commentators, such as Rashi, thought the *Shekhinah* would be visible between the hands of the priests at the priestly blessing (Hagigah 16a). Hence, the infinity of God can be manifest as filling the whole earth and also as located in a specific place in the temple.

Despite, or because of the mirror imagery, the twelfth century Jewish thinker Yehudah HaLevi considers the vision of God tradition alive in his own time and paradigmatic. In his *Kuzari*, he suggests visualizing the *Shekhinah* (*Sefer HaKuzari* III:19): "When [the worshipper] concludes, [the verse of prayer] 'Who returns His Presence to Zion,' he should envision the Divine Presence (*Shekhinah*) standing before him and bow before it, as Israel would bow when they actually saw it." Halevi continues: "He who prays for attachment to the Divine Light, and the faculty of seeing it with his own eyes in this world, is nearly approaching the rank of prophets, is thus engaged in prayer—and nothing can bring man nearer to God than this." Halevi also directs his reader to use her imagination to conjure up the formative biblical scenes such as the binding of Isaac, the revelation at Sinai, the Tabernacle and the temple service in all its glory (*Sefer Ha-Kuzari* III:5).

Throughout the medieval period, the goal of many kabbalists was to attain a similar vision. In some ways, this is the entire meaning of thirteenth-century Kabbalah to see the divine, albeit as if through a mirror that does not shine on its own but can only reflect the light of above. The classic of Jewish mysticism, the *Zohar*, is primarily a visual tradition, consisting of repeated invitations to share a vision of the divine. Its use of the phrase "come and see" (*ta hazi*) emphasizes sight and the visual in contrast to the Talmudic phrase "come and hear." The kabbalistic vision is of the divine enfolded in lights and colors.^[10]

Even daily religious life is transformed by the *Zohar* into a sight-filled activity. The *Zohar* writes that whoever leaves a synagogue and enters the House of Study to engage in the study of the Torah will have the merit of seeing the face of the *Shekhinah*. So too, when scholars discuss the Torah, they often behold the face of the *Shekhinah* and are surrounded with fire. The *Zohar* relates that Rabbi Hiyya came to visit Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai and when Rabbi Hiyya looked inside at Rabbi Akiva, he glimpsed the face of the

Shekhinah. When the *Zohar* claims that a person saw the face of the *Shekhinah*, the term *Shekhinah* was simply a synonym for God, but a term referring to the human perception of the presence of God. The use of the term “face” brings with it suggestions of personification as well as a sense that one experiences a personal encounter with God. One easily finds parallels between the visualization of the divine (bhagwan) by Hindu gurus and the *Zohar*’s encounter with a mystic rabbi as divine.

Why is the performance of Jewish prayer about seeing the *Shekhinah* or divine light with one’s own eyes? Ezekiel saw a man on a divine throne. Kabbalah eventually substituted lights or the divine name for the form of a man on a throne. In the thirteenth century *Gate of Intentions of the Early Kabbalists*, we find lights: “If you want to do anything properly, recite a prayer, a blessing or its opposite, then you must visualize in your mind that you are light, and around the light is a throne of light. Upon it, imagine the known order of the lights.” Alternately, the thirteenth-century mystic, Isaac of Acco, wrote to visualize the divine name: “You should constantly keep the letters of the Divine Name in your mind as if they were in front of you, written in a book with Torah (Ashurit) script.”^[11]

In addition, much of the kabbalistic liturgy invites the participant to sing praises to the image of God, such as the image of God as a groom with locks of curly hair in the Hymn of Glory or bridal imagery of the Lurianic Friday night table song in which one invites the *Shekhinah* to one’s table.

Yet, sometimes Jews do attain a personified vision of the divine. Rabbi Abraham Berukhim (sixteenth century) was known for performing a midnight vigil, crying for the exile of the *Shekhinah*. He rose every night at midnight and walked through the streets of Safed crying out, “Arise, for the *Shekhinah* is in exile, and our holy house is devoured by fire, and Israel faces great danger.” He prayed to God to reveal such a vision to him. He journeyed to the Western Wall, where he did indeed have a vision. Out of the Wall came an old woman, dressed in black and deep in mourning. When he looked into her eyes, he became possessed of the grief of the *Shekhinah* over the suffering of Her children, the children of Israel, scattered to every corner of the earth.^[12]

Jewish mystics through the centuries sought these visions. Twentieth century Jewish mystic Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook left behind the mystical

diaries of his quest to see God and defended the visual and the important role of imagination in Judaism before his students who safeguarded the more traditional auditory and conceptual Jewish mysticism.

Vision in Twentieth-Century Judaism

In the twentieth century, the aforementioned Rabbi Kook (*Shmoneh Kevazim* 1:31) writes that one who views God with a physical image is allowed to visualize God as long as one does not actually create a statue or picture. Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, the martyred Piaseczner Rebbe, in a controversial passage responds to the question of one who has difficulty praying to a completely abstract God. He gives advice to the beginner in worship: “One should know that God has no picture, but a physical person imagines [an image] in order that his imagination will be able to grasp onto” something perceivable. [\[13\]](#)

Rabbi Menachem Froman (d. 2013) expresses some of the Jewish tension well: “The entire dynamic and tension of the religious life is built on our continuous attempt to see what is impossible to see since the Torah says, ‘No one shall see me and live.’” Not willing to rest on the impossibility, Froman continues: “yet, in the Torah it is written that Moses saw God face to face therefore it is possible to see Him. This is certain—without sight there cannot be a connection.” [\[14\]](#)

Even Rabbi Soloveitchik writes, “Not even Maimonides succeeded in his attempt to purge Jewish liturgy of poetic elements and anthropomorphic symbols derived from our sensational experience . . . it is not the logos but the psycho-physical man who sings of God and His Glory.” [\[15\]](#) Maimonides included the non-corporeality of God among his articles of faith, but this was sternly rejected by Rabbi Avraham ben David who was guided by the practical needs of the worshipper who imagines God in sensible forms and cannot rest with the distant transcendental deity.

In the end, the need for sensory forms remained channeled into the words of Torah, the divine name, or even in looking at the Torah scroll. Almost all of the attempts to see God or attain a visualization of the divine within Judaism stayed within the realm of the mind and internal senses, limited mainly to the imagination of mystics and poets, without the convenience of statues or pictures as known in Hinduism. Yet, R. Nachman of Breslov (d. 1810) considered imagination as the source of faith and of prophecy. “For the essence of faith depends on the power of the imagination . . . when the imagination is repaired, this brings about a repair of holy, true faith, and false faiths are nullified” (*Likkutei Moharan Batra*, 8).

DIVINE IMMANENCE

Kumari

When visiting Nepal, it is striking to see a young girl dressed as a goddess confined to a house and appearing at set times from a window.

Northern Hindus participate in a tradition known as Kumari, or *Kumari Devi*, the worshiping of young prepubescent girls (*kumari*) as manifestations of the divine female energy or *devi* as a representation of divine consciousness spread all over the creation, as the spirit of femininity or pure potentiality of the female form, independent of a male. In the Shakta text —*Devi Mahatmyam* or *Chandi*—the goddess is said to have declared that she resides in all female living beings in this universe. ^[16]

In the Nepalese practice, the selected girl is considered a *Kumari* goddess for her entire childhood. The selection of the living goddess is a highly elaborate tantric ritual; Tantrism in Nepal is very strong and popular. Her preliminary test is of thirty-two attributes of bodily perfection, including the color of her eyes, the shape of her teeth, the sound of her voice, and her horoscope.

This veneration of a living Kumari in Nepal is relatively recent, dating only from the seventeenth century. In contrast, Northern India practices a similar tradition where select girls are symbolically dressed up only one day a year for the pageant and worshipped during the festival of Navaratri, where each aspect of womanhood is celebrated, and are brought to a temple for a blessing.

This is a good case to think about what the Jewish category for such an activity would be since it does not fit into our standard view of Hindu idols as objects or statues.

What is a *devi*? Medieval Hebrew and Arabic translated the word as angel (*malakhim* or *malkaya*). Judeo-Arabic texts considered *devas* to be naturalistic and cosmological forces. By contrast, modern English translations use the word god or gods, but the word for God, capital G, in Northern India Hinduism is *Ishvara* or Bhagwan. People generally have a single *Ishvara* but many *devas*.

What is the Jewish translation of *devi* in the twenty-first century? Is it still angel? In the Hindu *tantras*, the concept of power (*sakti*) forms the focus of interest. Even though a Kumari is a virgin who represents pure and untouched creativity, she is simultaneously a tangible representation of potential creative energy of the eventual powers of mother goddess. One must also ask: Do the two traditions of India and Nepal, one that is clearly symbolic, and the other using the girl as a representative of God's energy, count as two different traditions from a Jewish perspective?

What is the Jewish conceptualization of this Hindu conception of divinity? Unlike the Christian incarnation, there is no divine becoming flesh or human because only her spirit represents divinity. It should also be noted that the infinite unknown of the Brahma is not known or manifest through her. She only represents the creative potential of the feminine.

Worship of the girl is neither a rejection nor an addition to God the Creator, but is rather a personification of a power. Scholar C. J. Fuller stated that based on his ethnography, the Kumari devotional is an ideal of women's purity just as wisdom or wealth can be personified with a bodily representation.

Further, Fuller claims that Hindus will insist that they accept only one God, but at the same time speak of the many deities they worship. Simple binaries do not work, but it is not self-contradictory. There is a belief in the need for the infinite to have many manifestations and many names with fluidity between them. Every leaf falling, plant growing, passing animal, or stone boulder can be treated as a focus of worship. From an anthropological framework, this concept shows the unity of all beings and that God is infinitely manifested in everything. From a theological perspective, however, the many Hindu theological systems are all different on these points and

need separate presentations.

Judaism's Categories

In studying immanence in Judaism as it relates to Hinduism, one should start with the late eighteenth-century debates between Hasidim and their opponents, the Mitnaggdim, as fundamental to the discussion.

Hasidism says that the whole world is filled with glory; if one is able to approach the world with this awareness, one is able to realize one is in God's presence. In the Hasidic text by Shlomo Lutzker in his introduction to *Maggid Devarav LeYaakov*, the pious one is advised to see God's attributes in the physical. For example, when one tastes sweetness in food, then one's thoughts should consider the sweet taste as an attribute of God's sweetness. Physical objects are manifestations of specific divine attributes. Similar to the *devi*, the material object is only divine when treated as divine.

In contrast, the anti-Hasidic thinker Rabbi Hayim of Volozhin (nineteenth century) forbids one's connection to the godly qualities manifest in the world. Relevant to our discussion, Rabbi Hayim goes out of his way to mention that the prophet Daniel would not let himself be worshipped and neither would the patriarch Jacob allow his corpse to be worshipped. This is part of a broader Mitnagged critique of Hasidic immanence and the act of worshipping saints and graves (*Nefesh HaHayyim* 3:9).

Closer to the Hindu idea is that of Rabbi Isaac Luria (sixteenth century), who taught that one should kiss one's mother's hands on the Sabbath evening because she is manifesting or reflecting the divine aspect of the higher feminine aspects (*tevhunah*).

The *Zohar* proposes that every saint (*tzadik*) is an extension of divinity and personification of a divine name. The Bible says that everyone should go up to Jerusalem to see the face of God, but the *Zohar* goes even further and states, "who is the face of the master God, this is Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai." Rav Nachman of Breslov championed this form of seeing God in the *tzadik*, yet some, such as Rabbi Yakov Emden (eighteenth century) considered this *Zohar* as association, something else with God (*shituf*), and blasphemous.

Rabbinic tradition considered that God was manifest in the ancient Tabernacle as *Shekhinah*—literally, the indwelling, the God who is

omnipresent, explained as, “there is no place devoid of God” (*Shemot Rabbah* 2:5). Nevertheless, Jews almost never actually worship their objects as an image or a representation of God. The notable case where they did was in the biblical story of the worship of the golden calf (Exod. chapter 32), the sin of inappropriately finding God in this world. The medieval Jewish thinkers Yehudah Halevi and Nahmanides both consider the sin of the golden calf to be the very sin of using a physical object to serve God. Bahye, on the same verse, states that the Israelites were clearly intending to worship God and not another force, but the calf was an appeal to a limited aspect of the divine, one face of the divine throne.

For them, the Tabernacle as a physical place and object was a compromise between only serving an abstract deity without the physical and the very real need of the people to worship through perceptible sensory objects. The visual and material aspects of the Tabernacle allowed the people to worship in a concrete and tangible manner. The Tabernacle, thus, contains two opposites: on the one hand, it reveals the *Shekhinah* and allows for God’s presence in the world; on the other, it restricts that presence to a single concrete place. Hinduism does not have these restrictions. Hindus would not understand why one would keep people from worshipping physical objects or in many places.

I once visited the local Chabad house in India. The rabbi, himself a former Israeli hippie, is talking to a twenty-year younger version of himself. The rabbi said that Chabad teaches that God is in all things but that we cannot bear God’s presence or see God’s light. Instead, he maintained that we use the world around us to serve God by means of *mizvot*. In the meantime, God has hidden his light until the messiah.

The man, twenty years his junior, objected by saying that God is in all things. God is in nature! God is in trees! The rabbi asked if he *truly* saw God in all things, to which his interlocutor responded affirmatively. He then said that he was glad the young man could see God’s light, even if most could not; it is hidden because humans cannot bear it so it appears like nature. Rather, God contracted himself and is only available through *mizvot*. Ten minutes later, as a part of the Welcoming the Sabbath service, the Rabbi announces in Hebrew to turn to the west in order to greet the *Shekhinah*. The young man asked: we should visually see Her, right?

The same Chabad rabbi had taught his Indian house servant to turn to

the wall size image of the Lubavitcher Rebbe in the room and say “Long Live, King Messiah, our Lord, creator, and redeemer.” He considered the rebbe as the immanence of the Creator God.

Rabbi Moses Cordovero

Rabbi Moses Cordovero, the sixteenth-century Kabbalist, formulates one of the clearest Jewish doctrines of immanence: God is in all things; even stones are filled with divinity.^[17] He says:

The essence of divinity is found in every single thing—nothing but divinity exists. Since it causes everything to be, no thing can live by anything else. It enlivens them; its existence exists in each existent. . . . If you suppose that *Ein Sof* (Infinite Divine) emanates until a certain point, and that from that point on is outside of it, you have dualized. God forbid! Realize, rather, that Ein Sof exists in each existent. Do not say, “This is a stone and not God.” God forbid! Rather, all existence is God, and the stone is a thing pervaded by divinity. (Shi’ur Qomah, 206b)

This is similar, in certain ways, to the Hindu concept that the divine may be immanent in all things but in contrast, for Cordovero and other Kabbalists, the divine immanence is present, but one cannot actually worship or bow to the stone or object itself. That would be the sin of “cutting the shoots” of separating a lower aspect of reality from the infinity. The stone is divine as long as one sees it as part of the chain of being, which culminates in the infinite divine; one must also acknowledge that the infinite divine is known in all of creation.

Elsewhere, Cordovero is explicit about this nonreciprocal relationship between the divine and the world: “God is everything that exists, though everything that exists is not God. It is present in everything, and everything comes into being from it. Nothing is devoid of its divinity. Everything is within it” (*Elimah Rabbati*, 24d–25a). Yet, Cordovero encourages his readers to contemplate how divinity fills all things. Divinity flows and inheres in each thing that exists: “God’s presence fills the entire world. Contemplating this, you are humbled, your thoughts purified” (*Or Yaqar*, 15:203a).

Following the approach of Cordovero, the alter rebbe of Chabad, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi considers this immanence as only useful to realize that we can instrumentally use everything in this world to serve God. There is no actual finding of God in every object, just the notion that we can use the object to serve God. In the service of God, we reveal the inner divine essence behind the physicality and make it a vehicle for the spiritual, orienting toward a specified divine purpose. The totality of God and the immanence of God are distinct. Jews do not worship the *tefilin* because of the immanence of God. In actuality, some forms of non-*advaitan Vedanta* philosophy are similar to Chabad in that they distinguish between the discussion of higher unity, “all is God,” and lower unity, “God is all,” the light in *mizvot*.

God is All and some Advaitan Worldviews

In Chabad thought, there is a two-part formulation that “God is All and All is God.” The contemporary Chabad Hasidic thinker, Yitzhak Ginzburgh, writes that all idolatrous religions, especially those of India, emerged out of split thinking. For him, Hindus only affirm “All is God” by itself, divorced from the other half “God is All”; therefore, one can mistakenly come to identify the world itself with God—to the extent that one can, in one’s opinion, God forbid, bow to idols or cows. The underpinning of the ability to worship using all things is the Advaitic recognition that God is in all. [\[18\]](#)

Alan Goshen-Gottstein’s book *Same God Other God: Hinduism and the Problem of Idolatry* was based on his extensive firsthand knowledge of the Advaitan position gained in his extensive time spent in ashrams. From his point of view, worship of an aspect of creation, along with the creator, is precisely what Judaism rejects. For Goshen-Gottstein, the central Jewish question is how to evaluate Hindu worship using an image or object as the Divine. Goshen-Gottstein’s presentation does not use a distinction between an unknown God and worshipping a God who manifests in everything. In addition, he does not acknowledge as relevant the Hindu non-*advaitan* positions of emanation schemes in which a theistic all-pervading God showers the world with his energy. According to his assertion, most forms of Hinduism rarely consider the objects that they worship as intermediaries to

the great God.

Rather, in his book, he considers the prevailing notion that God, the Absolute, takes the form of these beings, or put differently, comes as these beings. Consequently, in his opinion, one may safely say that when Hindus often make an image to be worshipped, it is not necessarily approached as the image of some being of an inferior position on the metaphysical ladder. In this case, God Himself is worshipped through that form and is captured in that image. Therefore, Goshen-Gottstein uses as his Jewish category to explain these cases the *tosafot* concept of association (*shituf*), of associating forms with God, a category used by Jews to explain worship of Jesus as part of the Trinity.^[19]

In contrast, the Christian theologian Mariasusai Dhavamony in his work *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Theological Soundings and Perspectives* discusses how Hindu immanence admits degrees based on *avatara*, emanation, and energies; all is not the Absolute Divinity. Dhavamony writes this even though he, as a Christian, was originally explicitly trying to connect Hindu immanence to Christian incarnation; nevertheless, his research showed the widespread significance to most Hindus of not confusing the Absolute and the manifest forms.^[20] As mentioned in many ways in this book, there are many Hindus who consider the image to be on a lower metaphysical plane than the Absolute. The terminological distinction between *Brahman*, *devas*, and *Kumari* suggests an awareness of the metaphysical differences between these two categories, which parallels the emphasis placed in Jewish sources on the distinction between creator and creation. However, does it matter during the act of worship?

***Bhagavad Gita* and Immanence**

Another way to approach the topic of normative Hindu ideas on this topic is to look at the traditional commentaries on the *Bhagavad Gita*, the great work of theistic Vaishnavism. The average Jew in the street may not know Rashi or Maimonides, but the Jewish commentators clearly reflect the Jewish tradition. The average Hindu in the street also may not know the texts of the commentators, but they certainly reflect the norms of their own tradition.

The *Gita* contains passages of panentheism along with theism. To use one verse to illustrate the meaning of immanence: “He who is rooted in oneness realizes that I am in every being, wherever he goes, he remains in me” (*Bhagavad Gita* 6:29–30). This passage, similar to Hasidic theology, highlights God’s imminence in all things and all things as God.

The Vaishnaiva Dvaita thinker Madhva on the passage gives the following theistic commentary to the *Bhagavad Gita* passage in that God is in all things and all things are in a theistic God. “The eternal soul residing within all beings is the omnipresent and omniscient Supreme Lord. All creatures also exist as well within the Supreme Lord as the soul.” Madhva says: “One who perceives this sees the Supreme Lord equally in everything from a blade of grass to the *Brahman* or spiritual substratum pervading all existence . . . and all creatures abiding in the Supreme Lord.” Nevertheless, Madhva held that even after liberation, there are gradations in the human capacity to perceive God.

Ramanuja, in contrast, explains that the passage is teaching about the oneness of all souls as “the same transcendental essence in all beings equally.” Nevertheless, Ramanuja does not think that the ordinary worshipper attains that level, only the yogi who is “mature in meditation has achieved realization of the soul, does not discern any differences in the myriad of multifarious physical manifestations.” Everyone else lives in a world of differentiation.

To take a contemporary example of Hindu self-understanding from the highly theological and popular Vaishnavite group, Swami Niharayan (BAPS) in their explanation of the many *devas*:

Hinduism is not a polytheistic religion. For all Hindus, there is only one Supreme God.

God grants some of these various higher beings cosmic powers and assigns them the responsibilities of running the “machinery of the universe.” These higher beings are also known as devtas, devas or gods. Hindus also readily acknowledge that these gods are clearly subservient to and have their origin and sustenance in one Supreme God. Hindus are thus monotheists, worshippers of one Supreme God, in every sense of the word. [\[21\]](#)

For groups such as this, the *devas* run the universe for the Supreme God, which is not much different from the medieval Jewish evaluation of *devas* as angels.

NATURAL SACRED

Diana Eck describes the role of aniconic natural symbols within Hinduism as that which avoids direct images. She quips that much of rural India is dabbed with *kumkum* (colored powder) in that the world around the believer is all an access to the divine. From a quantitative point of view, she argues that in their immense majority, the cults to the gods of India are devoid of anthropomorphic images; instead, they rely on the interaction between aniconic images of trees, stones, and rivers.

After returning from India, the Passover Seder table made me think that if it was a festive meal, it should have had an offering to a deity or more importantly, that there should have been a deity at the table in the form of an effigy or some other type of image. At least let me draw a face on one of the matzot. All ritual, all religious acts, all sacred meals, need a deity and *puja*.

This is where the difference between Hinduism and Judaism lies. While Hinduism surrounds itself with images and icons of deities in order to bring the divine world and human world closer together, Judaism generally leaves God's image out of the senses and objects; it does not make an icon of God to focus upon. Judaism presents God as available in human words, as biblical words, as a concept, and as a miraculous story of God's actions to be recited. Hindu worship, on the other hand, is generally personified. Trees, stones, and rivers are worshipped, but this worship carries with it an additional component of a quasi-accessibility.

In Judaism, for example, individuals pray at the stone wall of the Western Wall in Jerusalem and place requests in its stones, treating the wall as a presence of God. Hindus would have eventually drawn a face on the wall, if not several faces. They would have also affixed ribbons and flowers as well as place colored pigment on it in order to identify the wall, directly or indirectly, with one or several deities. The wall represents human access to the divine, which would explain the need for a painted face in order to have face to face contact with the divine.

Namaskar

Hindus in Northern India of equal status greet each other formally by a gesture called *namaskara* or in vernacular Hindi, *namaste*. The word literally means “I bow to you.” To demonstrate *namaste*, you bring your hands to your heart with your palms together. You then bow your head slightly to each other. This gesture is the same gesture made to deities, which according to the anthropologist C. J. Fuller, implies no distinction between divine and human beings. [\[22\]](#)

There is a bit of divine in every person. Simultaneously, the gesture is a condensed form of a hierarchical asymmetrical world in which wife makes the gesture to her husband, children to parents, students to teachers, and an employee to an employer. Even in the divine realm, the lower divinity bows before the higher one. When two ordinary people greet each other that way, it is a sign of equality.

One of my Hindu doctors in the United States has a little shrine in his office with pictures of modern Hindu thinkers and it also includes a picture of Albert Einstein. He knows Einstein is not technically a traditional *deva* but he is praying to the spirit of wisdom and scientific inquiry. If a Yeshiva was a Hindu institution, there would be a shrine to Rashi and Maimonides, the teachers of this century and the founder of the school. They would offer a flower to the shrine before class, before public lectures, or exams. The offering is not an actual sacrifice, nevertheless Judaism rejects this in that one does not bow or make offerings to people.

Trees in Hinduism

Holy trees are everywhere in India. Continuing with the theme of deity personification, in Hinduism, the Banyan tree, the Pilpal tree, and the Neem tree manifest the divine. They are treated as having a personal identity—a person or god to call out to in prayer. Hindus quickly move beyond comparison to personification and divination. If you sense divinity, then any object is capable of embodying God. [\[23\]](#)

According to the *Skanda Purana*, “the great wonder is that gods takes the form of trees” and that “there is no other form of Vishnu on earth like

this tree form" (152:1). Further, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna says, "There is a banyan tree which has its roots upward and its branches down, and the Vedic hymns are its leaves. One who knows this tree is the knower of the Vedas" (*Bg.* 15.1). The leaf of the Banyan tree is said to be the resting place for Krishna.

Most foreigners who visit Varanasi go to view the Burning of the Dead, the temples erected to Shiva, and the *aarti*, the waving of the fire lamps on the Ganges, but on most nights, the biggest event is the worship to a tree at the very first *ghat* as a source of fortune and blessing. Pious women pour water on the roots, circumambulate the tree 108 times, tie it with red and yellow string, put bright orange *sindur* on it, and offer incense.

David Haberman, professor of Hinduism who wrote on the worship of trees and stones, stated that some see their worship of trees as Vishnu, or as a part of Vishnu. For others, the trees are all the major gods, and for others the tree was clearly *Durga*. As part of their role in worship, trees have no official priest or ritual, allowing more freedom in the methods and means in worship.

Haberman records from his fieldwork that some people, including students and professors, said that they feel God more in the trees on the campus of Banaras University than at the big University Temple. During my time in India, I had two sacred trees near my apartment. One was on the corner near my apartment on the way to the gate out of campus, surrounded by a low brick retaining wall about two feet high. People often tied ribbons around it, lit votive candles, and placed their used clay and papier-mâché statues of gods at its base to dissolve in the rain.

The other tree was across from a small shrine sized temple, for daily use by the professors who lived on this tree-lined row, and seemed to have constant serious worship, evidenced by the offerings left at its base: the ever-renewed *sindur* and incense as well as the ever-changing faces added to the tree.

Trees of Asherah

The Bible, so too, speaks of the preciousness of trees by comparing them to humans by stating, "[m]an is the tree of the field" (Deut. 20:19), but does not say God dwells in trees. Nevertheless, in the ancient Near East,

there was a widespread belief in the tree-dwelling divinity. For the Canaanites, the tree was the embodiment of divinity. One would address a prayer to the tree and ask for its healing, similar to the Hindu treatment of the Banyan tree, the Pilpal tree, and the Neem tree—also manifestations of the divine. Biblical archaeologists have suggested that until the sixth century BCE, the Israelite people had household shrines, or at least figurines, of Asherah. The worship of Asherah as described in the Bible is repeatedly condemned and frequently the Israelites commanded to “overthrow (the Canaanite) altars, and break their pillars, and burn their Asherah groves with fire; and ye shall hew down the graven images of their gods” (Deut. 12:3; cf. Exod. 34:14; Deut. 7:5, 16:21). [\[24\]](#)

Nevertheless, the veneration of trees remains part of Israeli folk religion even today, where many go to find a spouse, to have children or to have good marriage. The tree near the Tomb of Rabbi Yonatan ben Uziel Ben (in Amuka, Upper Galilee) has recently become a center of mass pilgrimage by single girls who are specifically searching for a mate. After praying at the tomb, many who visit the tree leave a rag and written personal requests. This is close to the Hindu sentiment. [\[25\]](#)

Halakhah

Jewish law forbids deriving benefit from the wood of the worshipped tree, the *Asherah*. The Mishnah draws a distinction between worshipping natural objects and those that are man-made. A mountain cannot become forbidden for use when it is worshipped because it is part of the ground. However, a tree is considered man-made because a person planted it for worship.

What about an uncultivated wild tree that was only worshipped later, one opinion says that it is like the mountain while others, such as Rabbi Yossi, state that a tree is fundamentally different from a mountain, as man usually plants it, hence forbidden. [\[26\]](#)

Finally, the Talmud adds a prohibition of walking under a worshipped

tree because there are undoubtedly pieces of sacrificial offerings at its base. However, if the tree was planted in a place in which it obstructs the public thoroughfare, then it is permitted, as sacrifices are not done in crowded places, and even if they do, the sacrifices would become trampled to be unrecognizable.

This prohibition was of deep concern to one of the Chabad rabbis in India with whom I met. The complexity of applying Jewish law to regulate how the rabbi should conduct himself around sacred trees opens up new questions that have never been seriously addressed by the *halakhah* since the Talmudic era. Nevertheless, the goal of this book is not to answer halakhic questions, so I am not going to deal with current legal decisions on this topic, nor on similar issues.

Cows

Why do Hindus worship the cow? Actually, Hindus do not worship cows. They are not a sacred object worshipped like a tree. Instead, they respect and honor the cow. They consider that by honoring this gentle animal, who gives more than she takes, we honor all creatures. The cow is a symbol of the earth, the nourishing, ever-giving, undemanding provider representing life and the sustenance of life. Hindus regard all living creatures as sacred—mammals, fishes, birds, and more. They acknowledge this reverence for life in their special affection for the cow. At festivals, they decorate and honor her, but they do not worship her in the sense that they worship a tree or stone. Hindu children are taught to decorate the cow with garlands, paint, and ornaments. The cow and her sacred gifts—milk and ghee in particular—are essential elements in Hindu worship, penance, and rites of passage.

Already in the Vedas, cows represent wealth and joyous earthly life: “The cows have come and have brought us good fortune. In our stalls, contented, may they stay! May they bring forth calves for us, many-coloured, giving milk for Indra each day” (*Rig Veda*, 4.28.1;6). From the Mahabharata, “Cows are auspicious and sacred, and grantor of every wish and givers of life. There is nothing that is more sacred or sanctifying than cows.” Vasishtha said: “Every morning, people should bow with reverence unto cows” (*Bhagavad-Gita*: 10:28).

While many Hindus are not vegetarians, most respect the still widely held code of abstaining from eating beef, which is similar to Jews who do not keep the strict Jewish dietary laws, yet refrain from eating pork.

PHILOSOPHIC RELIGION, POPULAR POLYTHEISM, AND FOREIGN WORSHIP

When I present lectures on Hinduism in Jewish venues, I inevitably hear from the audience that everything I say is only about the narrow elite Hindus who are like Westerners. They claim that the masses have no knowledge of any of these Hindu philosophies. The audience has never been to India, has never read or studied about the topic, and generally, is not socially connected to practitioners of Hinduism, yet the listeners are persistent in their stereotypes.

Polytheism and Popular Religion

Where does this widespread prejudice in assuming that Indians are primitive come from? The short answer is that this approach derives from seventeenth-century thinkers, such as the English philosopher, David Hume. Mainstream books on Hinduism repeated this idea of a distinction between popular and philosophic religions until the twentieth century. Hume presented a three-stage evolution toward Protestantism, beginning with the first people being polytheists, and then ritual legalists such as Judaism, culminating in Protestant Christianity.

Hume considers the basis of polytheism “not the beauty and order we discover in the works of nature, as that leads us to genuine theism,” but rather a religion that responds directly to the human hopes, fears, and misery caused by weather, illness, and wars. “When human beings are in a more primitive and backward state of society,” Hume writes, we find that the “ignorant multitude conceives of these unknown causes as depending on invisible, intelligent agents who they may influence by means of prayers and sacrifice. By this means, human beings hope to control what they do not understand” by means of many gods (*Natural History of Religion*, 4.2).

Hume thinks, “As a result of this process, the world becomes populated with human-like invisible, intelligent powers that are objects of worship”;

however, is this not the concern of every religion? Hume answers: no, in that polytheism does not concern itself with the abstract question concerning the origin or supreme government of the universe. For him, primitive people who are struggling for their daily survival do not have time to speculate about philosophy or our idea of God (*Natural History of Religion*, 4.2).

Hume sees two tiers of religion, the intellectuals and the common people, in which the common people are driven by fears and anxieties to accept forces beyond their control and slip into polytheism.

What does this have to do with Hinduism in that much of it also applies to uneducated Jews and Christians? The application of Hume's line of thought to Hinduism was made by eighteenth-century authors on Hinduism. Sir William Jones (1746–1794), for example, was an Anglo-Welsh philologist, a judge on the Supreme Court of Bengal, and a scholar of ancient India, who was particularly known for his studies of Indo-European languages and wrote six volumes on Hinduism. It once had a magnificent past but it did not progress, which yielded a degenerate present.

Jones explicitly compared the Hindus and the Jews and states that both groups are stunted in their development by an ancient age that needs rituals. Jones considered Hindus as similar to the Israelites who needed rituals and ceremonies because of their childlikeness. With the full manhood of Christianity these rituals become superfluous.^[27] So modern Jews should be careful about accepting the Hindu side of this pejorative statement, since much of the same applies to Judaism.

The nineteenth-century Bengali Renaissance accepted Hume's distinction. His philosophy helped to distinguish the philosophic parts of the Hindu religion from the popular superstition. (See the chapter below on modern Hinduism). During this same era, Judaism refashioned itself so as to meet this rationalist and Protestant challenge, creating Reform and aesthetic Orthodoxy.

Max Muller, the German Sanskritist and translator of the Hindu volumes in the series *Sacred Books of the East*—who never traveled to India—sought a rational meaning in the Vedas which he considered Aryan and philosophic as opposed to the popular Hindu religion of the last twenty-five hundred years, which he considered degenerate and primitive. His focus on

the ancient classics at the expense of medieval and modern Hinduism is the core of many religion textbooks to this day. Muller despised the *Puranas* and Agamic literature and proclaimed that they are later degenerations of the ancient faith. Like Jones, Muller saw Christianity as the highest expression of religion to the detriment of Judaism and Hinduism.

This view became standardized in the introduction to religion textbooks such as L. S. S. O'Malley's 1935 work, *Popular Hinduism: The Religion of the Masses*. O'Malley writes:

The differences between the beliefs and practices of the cultured classes and those of the masses, mostly unlettered villagers, are so great that they almost seem to be differences of kind rather than of degree. The religion of the latter has few of the higher spiritual conceptions of Hinduism and represents in the main its lower side. A mixture of orthodox Hinduism and of that primitive form of religion which is known as animism, it combines Brahmanical rites and observances with the fetishism of lower cults. (vii)

Notice that the elite Brahminical rites are combined with the lower cults to the detriment of both when contrasted to the modern Neo-Hindu approaches.

Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, Jews were also considered pagan in their rituals, so much so that Jewish practice was used to understand Native American practices and other newly discovered peoples. Let us not forget, in our discussion, the visit of Samuel Pepys, English naval administrator who is now most famous for his 1663 diary entry, detailing his visit to a synagogue for Simhat Torah. Pepys saw Judaism as brutish and primitive, the way contemporary Jews have viewed Hindu festivals:

But, Lord! To see the disorder, laughing, sporting, and no attention, but confusion in all their service, more like brutes than people knowing the true God, would make a man forswear ever seeing them more and indeed I never did see so much, or could have imagined there had been any religion in the whole world so absurdly performed as this. [\[28\]](#)

The philosopher G. F. W. Hegel, following Hume, saw Judaism as a mediation between primitive religion and Christianity where Judaism shared aspects of both.

Jewish ritual was only excluded from the primitive in the twentieth century. James G. Frazer, in his classic work *The Golden Bough* (1890), placed the rituals of biblical religion amid primitive polytheism. Originally, Semitic scholar Robinson Smith, in an 1880 article discussed totemism and animal worship among the Hebrews; however, he later switched and kept the biblical religion separate from the primitive by treating many statements as mere metaphor. In 1951, the biblical scholar H. Frankfort wrote that scholars should not run to create parallels between the ancient Near East and the Bible, almost repudiating the connection in Western culture.

Foreign Worship

Is Hume's concept of polytheism and the Jewish concept of foreign worship (*avodah zarah*) the same? In a word: no. Polytheism is about being primitive, magical, and behind the evolutionary curve—a Protestant pejorative. The Jewish halakhic category of foreign worship deals with a mistake that leads people from a primordial natural theism to a form of worship using representation.

The most common definition of the Jewish concept of foreign worship is that of the medieval commentator Rashi, who considers the prohibition of using images. Jeroboam, in the biblical books of Kings, erected two golden calves to the biblical monotheistic God. In Jewish thought, the representation is forbidden as foreign worship even if it is monotheistic. Judaism remains without images and statues, compared to the iconography-heavy religions of Christianity and certainly Hinduism. The Mishnah (Sanhedrin 7:6) delineates it as follows.

Foreign Worship to an idol includes one who worships, sacrifices, offers incense, pours libations, bows, accepts it as a god, and one who says to it, "You are my god." But one who embraces, kisses, sweeps, sprinkles, washes, anoints, dresses, or puts shoes on it, [merely] transgresses a negative commandment.

If we turn to Maimonides, we see foreign worship as a categorical mistake of logic and of following imagination instead of reason. He presents the use of images in worship as only having started in the era of Enosh, the first son of Seth who figures in the generations of Adam in the book Genesis:

In the days of Enosh, the people fell into gross error, and the counsel of the wise men of the generation became foolish. Enosh himself was among those who erred. Their error was as follows: Since God, they said, created these stars and spheres to guide the world, set them on high and allotted them honor, and since they are ministers who minister before Him, they deserve to be praised and glorified, and honor should be rendered them. [. . .] They began to erect temples to the stars, offered up sacrifices to them, praised and glorified them in speech, and prostrated themselves before them—their purpose, according to their perverse notions, being to attain the Creator's will. This was the root of foreign worship, and this is what the idolaters, who knew its fundamentals, said. They did not however maintain that there was no God except the particular star. (1:1)

Foreign worship is born of a confusion that grows from the fact that stars and astral bodies govern the world and the proper way to worship is to one true God. It is a categorical mistake followed by the second mistake of needing temples, ritual, and sacrifice. Foreign worship is the misdirected quest to fulfill God's will and to grant Him honor through ritual to these forces regardless of good intention.

Maimonides continues his presentation by explaining how this view of biblical history plays itself out as a restriction on Jewish practice:

The essence of the commandment of foreign worship is not to worship any creation, not an angel, a sphere, or a star, one of the four elements, nor any entity created from them. Even if the person worshiping knows that the Lord is the God, but nevertheless serves the creation in the manner in which Enosh and the people of his generation worshiped originally. (2:1)

Worshipping another being is what constitutes foreign worship. Jews

do not use any intermediary, angels, or natural force in their worship. Most traditional Jews accept this definition and consider Hinduism to be foreign worship. Nevertheless, traditional Jews have always had appeals to angels as part of the liturgy that seems to violate this approach. While images are a categorical error for Jews, images are the only way to reach the Absolute Infinite Divine for Hindus in that a sensory image is needed to focus human worship.

To understand the application of the Jewish concept of foreign worship here, let us contrast Hume to Maimonides in their concepts of incorrect worship of the divine. Maimonides thought that monotheism came first and polytheism came second as a mistake; for Hume, it was the other way around. According to Hume, people are primitive until they evolve into enlightened reason. To Maimonides, Hindus could retort that he is the one mistaken on the nature of worship and images are indeed needed. Hume's response would take a philosophic stance as opposed to the position of the masses, which the Neo-*Vedanta* modernists also did. The Jewish concept of foreign worship is about an inaccurate concept of the divine and the role played by the imagination in the need to construct images. The non-Jewish English word, "polytheism" is about a primitive state of humanity that could not conceptualize the divine.

Maimonides argues that we ought to endeavor to imitate God as much as it is possible for a human being. In imitating God, we move toward greater human perfection, which may eventually result in the knowledge of God, a goal shared with Hindus. Alternately, Hume states that a person does not seek to obtain knowledge of God or to imitate God, but rather to be rational in an Enlightenment sense. For Hume, to consider God as an intellect or a divine mind is an anthropomorphism because reason teaches that we cannot speak of God beyond the attributes, while for Maimonides the bigger problem is corporeality. He would be bothered more by Hindu images than by the theologies of the perfection of an infinite divine.

In explaining the meaning of the rabbinic dictum, "the Torah speaks in the language of humans," Maimonides claims that the Bible is written in a way that all people are capable of understanding even prior to their philosophic training (Guide I: 26, 56). According to Maimonides, during the first exposure to things divine, the multitude ought to be instructed as to the perfection of God in terms using only the external sense of the words.

However, upon further understanding, he claims that people ought to be “made to accept on traditional authority the belief that God is not a body; and that there is absolutely no likeness in any respect whatever between Him and the things created by Him” (Guide I: 35, 80).

Maimonides, similar to Saadayah, might have no problem with *Nyaya*, *Mimamsa*, and Yoga, and could theoretically find a way to accept many forms of *Vedanta*. The fundamental divide in the two religions from a Maimonidean perspective comes down to three key differences, the first of which is the proper method of worship. For Hindus, imagination, sight, sense, and aesthetics are essential to proper worship. Jews, in theory, do not embellish worship with the senses of the deity.

The second difference to note is that the Maimonidean philosophic religion was aimed at the elite, which incited a lack of tolerance toward any theology but his philosophic religion. Maimonides did not agree even with Jewish folk practices, lay devotions, or any vestigial forms of ancient religion and magic. The distinction between the elite and masses is a fundamental Maimonidean category.

Third, Hindus use images and intermediaries in their worship as a proper means to bring the person to God. Maimonides rejects this.

Judaism is often presented as the alternative to the worship of forces of nature, especially by early twentieth-century Jewish authors who presented Judaism as a break with biblical paganism. They painted the Bible using Hume’s distinction between monotheists and nature worshippers. Modern Jewish thinkers saw ethical monotheism as a stark division between transcendent creator and creation, but in reality, Jews from the Bible to modernity also worshipped God in immanent aspects.

Nahmanides and Others

Nahmanides (Rabbi Moses ben Nahman, also abbreviated as Ramban, 1194–ca. 1270), a Catalan Talmudist and biblical exegete, rejected Maimonides’s dismissal of the power of angels and spirits as mere superstition caused by a devolution into irrationality. Instead, he saw other religions as forgetful of the original omnipotent divine power:

There are three categories of foreign worship. The first group began

to worship the angels, the separate intelligences, because they knew that they have partial influence on the nations . . . these are called in the Torah “foreign gods” and “gods of the nations.” Even though they worshiped them they admitted that the great power and omnipotence was to the supernal God. The second group worshiped the visible heavenly hosts, the sun, moon, or constellations. . . . These people started to fashion many forms, statues, images, groves (*asherah*), and astrological images . . . The third group worships demons and spirits. (Commentary Exodus 20:3)

Nahmanides saw the prohibition as choosing to adore another divine force other than the God of Israel. The requirement for Jews is one of loyalty to the biblical God, rather than other forms of the divine and intermediaries; he is not concerned with the belief in intermediaries by non-Jews.

For Nahmanides, foreign worship compromises the exclusive relationship due by Jews to God alone. Biblical verses such as: “The eternal shall be my God” (Gen. 28:21) and “to be your God” (Lev. 11:45) explain that Jew’s loyalty. Verses such as “not to have others as gods, neither from all the angels above nor from all the hosts of heaven who are called *elohim* (gods)” present a prohibition against accepting any of these beings as gods, or saying to them, “thou are my god.”

A text ascribed to Rabbi Solomon Aderet, better known by his acronym Rashba—and also a student of Nachmanides—states that foreign worship is when a person has lost sight of God, who is the ultimate source of power and governance behind the lower forces. Rashba wrote that the other nations who each “worship the particular star that guides a particular place is not like someone who engages in *avodah zarah*, provided he knows and recognizes that the power of the star and its kingship are only due to God, who made it a ruler in that particular land.” In contrast, Jews should not worship intermediaries because “He set us apart as His heritage unto Him.”^[29]

Alon Goshen Gottstein, scholar of the Jewish-Hindu encounter, writes that “we might consider the specific manifestations of deities in Hinduism as part of what God has allotted this people, not through astral governance, but through the expressions of their religious imagination.” The goal would be to “leave room for a rich mythical, imaginative and artistic life, that is

particular to any given religious tradition, while balancing it with a more abstract, philosophical, if we will 'pure' understanding of God." For Goshen-Gottstein, "[a]ccording to this perspective, it may indeed be that Hindus worship various gods who are not the same as our God. Nevertheless, such worship may be legitimate and appropriate for them."^[30]

Goshen-Gottstein writes that when Jews and Hindus speak of God, they both mean the same thing yet something different. When it comes to the higher aspects of God, those that are expounded by philosophy, and where some commonality might be identified, Jews and Hindus may be able to recognize the same God. When it comes to the various forms of worship of gods, who are understood as expressions of divinity, Jews could no longer recognize the Hindu gods as their own.

Nevertheless, according to Goshen-Gottstein, the traditional category is the problem. "Classification as Avoda Zara sends all religions to the divine recycle bin" rendering it "senseless to reflect on the relative import of world religions." The halakhic category devalues the other religions in that traditionally Jews concluded "there is nothing of value to be learned or received from that religion."^[31]

During the colonial era, chief rabbi of Britain, Joseph H. Hertz (1872–1946), combined Hume with a universal tolerance. He stated that the heathens were not held responsible for a false conception of God and "were judged by God purely by their moral life." For Hertz, "a primitive stage of religious belief" can still form "part of God's guidance of humanity." "Even in their primitive version, [they] are serving the one true God" (Mal. 1:11). Further, "Even the heathen nations that worship the heavenly hosts" he affirms, "pay tribute to a Supreme Being, and in this way honor My name; and the offerings which they thus present (indirectly) unto Me are animated by a pure spirit, God looking to the heart of the worshipper."^[32]

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, editor of a modern edition of the Talmud, takes other religions at their word as theists and considers the high culture philosophic version as the correct version. First, he assumes that "Hinduism and Buddhism are sufficiently monotheistic in principle for moral Hindus and Buddhists to enter the gentile's gate into heaven." For Steinsaltz, "the compromises made or tolerated by the world's major religions as ways of rendering essentially monotheistic theologies easier in practice for large

populations of adherents.” So, a theist Shaivite or a Vaishnavite would fall under Jewish monotheism.^[33]

At the same time, however, Steinsaltz, while still following Hume, writes that “the less than absolutely monotheistic folk beliefs” of Hindus are considered in Jewish law to be violations of the monotheistic principles of those religions. Folk beliefs “are only problematic internally—solely within the discourse of another religion. Such violations do not affect what Judaism has to say that about” religion. For him, once the other religion is deemed sufficiently theistic, then they are not foreign worship despite the folk belief since Jewish law cannot be “violated by Hindus since Jewish law does not apply to them.” Steinsaltz does not address the other Jewish prohibitions of the Mishnah cited above on the objects worshipped. More importantly, Steinsaltz is not interested in whether his observations correspond to empirical reality either in books or anthropology.^[34]

However, in my opinion, Jews should neither embrace the Protestant category of polytheism, which possesses an implicit evolution to the truth of Christianity, nor should Jews use Hume’s version of the distinction between popular and philosophic religion. In addition, the traditional Jewish category of foreign worship in practice is a fundamental delegitimization of other religions as well as a rationale by which boundaries are erected in relation to what a Jew, who follows Jewish law, is allowed to do; it is not primarily a theological position.

Folk Religion

In the end, what is the religion of the folk in the villages? There are two main Western books on village Hinduism. Lawrence Babb’s *Divine Hierarchy* and the subsequent C. J. Fuller’s *The Camphor Flame*. In contrast to Western speculation from afar based on Hume, Lawrence Babb, an academic specialist on Hinduism who did field work in a small village, calls this distinction between philosophic Hinduism and primitive Hinduism into question. Babb notes that before he entered the field, his Western

education taught him to distinguish between the great tradition of the relatively few and the little tradition of the unreflective masses. In contrast, his field work showed that the two elements are complementary and that the Sanskrit's high tradition plays an important role in defining the local traditions while the local traditions define how the high tradition would be performed in a given location.

Babb specifically shows how ordinary villagers have internalized a hierarchy of behaviors with philosophic theologies behind them. A prime example is found in the high culture of the Brahmins, who serve in the temple and have fixed liturgy; however, the folk in their own local temples know that they themselves can perform rituals and worship lower *devas*. For these people, no god can be so demanding as to exclude their own worshippers from their altars. Local *devas* and temples are less strict than Brahmin temples but there remain rigid hierarchal differences between temples with a Brahmin priest and those without. Deities of the high culture such as Shiva or Vishnu are seen as responsible for the social order unlike smaller local ones who handle smallpox and fertility. According to Babb:

The Hindu pantheon is a fluid array of supernatural beings and tends to alter in form as one context is replaced by another. In some contexts particular deities are seen as discrete entities, but under other circumstances deities merge with one another and their characteristics blend. At the most abstract level differentiation disappears altogether, as is suggested in the frequently heard Hindu truism that "all gods are one."^[35]

Local villages may pray to deities who hear personal concerns: "Vishnu and Shiva, as great gods with general powers over the cosmos, are normally thought to be distant from mundane problems of ordinary people. For that reason, Hindus rarely ask them for help."^[36] All towns have a goddess to pray to for fertility, marriage, and smallpox even though she irrelevantly assumes different names. The big gods are known by the people but are seen as abstract and distant in both feeling and in their pure rituals, but the local *devas* are kept featureless so that tales and theology return to the high culture.

Prior Western approaches assumed a process of Sanskritization where

the lower castes absorb the ideas and practices of the higher ones; Babb finds this problematic on many levels. First, each region has vernacular sacred narratives, and as such, much of Hinduism already is in Tamil, Bengali, Hindi, and the other languages. Hindus share this common heritage of vernacular works such as Tuldsidas's version of the Ramayana or the Tamil Alvar poems. Even the elite philosophers know these texts better than the Sanskrit ones. The high Sanskrit culture and the culture of the ordinary villager are not separate or discrete from each other; there are merely differences of style or dialect, different modes of expression saying the same thing. Even complex theologies of philosophy and emanations are chanted by the folk in the vernacular or carved into images in the walls of the temples.

For the religion within contemporary urban slums, the more practical needs of daily life predominate over formal temple ritual. They stress the feminine Shakti elements in religion that are concerned with fertility, childbirth, health, and family. Ordinary people pray for worldly ends and individual needs in the same way all urban poor worry about money, relationships, and health in their religion. Like graffiti and hip-hop, the urban population creates their own original art, stories, and songs that catch on among the elite as part of modern popular culture.

NOTES

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7. Stahaneshwar Timalisina, "Imagining Reality: Image and Visualization in Classical Hinduism," *Southeast Review of Asian Studies*, Volume 35 (2013):62 citing the last page of the *Durgasaptashatī*.

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9. Rachel Neis, *The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture*.

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15. Joseph D. Soloveitchik, *The Halakhic Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998): 39–40.

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Chapter 7

Worship

PUJA

Worship in a Hindu temple seems quite strange to most Jews who witness it. The offerings and bowing to a statue seemingly runs completely against Jewish practice. This chapter will look at the Hindu style of worship and ask how far it is from Jewish worship.^[1]

Temple Worship

The word *puja* means to worship or to adore. Priests perform *puja* (worship) at sunrise, noon, sunset, and midnight. For a layperson, however, visiting a temple every day or even regularly is not mandatory, and many, if not most, devout Hindus mainly worship at home.

People come to the temple (*mandir*) whenever they like to visit the gods. Usually, a temple will have a number of different shrines around the room, each housing a *murti* of a different *deva*.

There are specific times throughout the day when priests perform rituals to these *murtis* and people gather to watch, receive blessings and blessed food. People may prostrate in front of the *murti*; they may also walk in a clockwise circle around it or meditate in front of it. In contemporary Hindu religious practice in India, the desire to get *prasada* (blessed food) and have *darshana* (vision of deity) are the two major motivations of pilgrimage and temple visits.

In Mumbai, there is a major temple to Ganesha—the god who is seen as responsible for prosperity. The temple is located on a side street that parallels the major freeway and is blocked by traffic guards and scaffolding, essentially obscuring the view of the non-descript white building. Wealthy business families dressed in their festive clothes arrive in a seeming procession down the street loaded with baskets of fruit to offer to the image.

Those bringing their offerings are well dressed in colorful outfits, and

could be identified as pilgrims from several blocks away. The happy and smiling families entered in the line to offer their fruits. They seem to be in competition for whom could bring the best basket of fruits and flowers. Afterwards, they receive a small piece of blessed fruit to eat.

My wife comments on the way people arrive—well dressed and with baskets—and noted that this is how she imagined the ancient Temple in Jerusalem during the first fruit season; to her, it is like the images of families carrying cornucopias of fruit to the Temple.

During the time that the families are in line waiting for their turn to bring their offering, they watch the other families bring their food offering baskets to the priests through close circuit TV screens. In turn, they present their gift and give the names and birth dates of the entire family to the priests in order to receive a blessing. (Think of the *mishebarach*—blessing for one's family—in synagogue when called up to the Torah.)

After the offering, the pilgrims pray at a variety of other minor shrines in the temple room on the way out. They seem to leave happy and confident in their certainty of the gift of continuous prosperity and celebrate with sweets and special snacks at the restaurants that line the temple street. No animal offerings, no elaborate ritual, just the well-arranged fruit and flower offerings of the happy middle class.

There is the widely accepted folk etymology that the word *mandir* (temple) means peace of mind. Visiting and spending time in a temple offer tranquility, peace of mind, and positive thoughts. Jews in India describe the synagogue in similar terms: it provides a sense of mental peace and tranquility.

Some people prostrate their body flat on the ground in front of the deity in order to symbolize the complete surrender of one's ego in veneration of the Lord. It is most common for devotees to place their palms and fingers of both the hands together, hold the hands close to the chest, and meditate on God. Some contemporary temples encourage a prayer before leaving, such as *Bhagavad-Gita* 12: 13–14, which affirms that the visit to the temple is to carry over into daily life as loving all people, avoiding hatred, and remaining dedicated to God with all one's heart and soul.

Worship Gestures

When Jews pray, the prescribed gestures as described in the Talmud are to simulate standing before a king. When Hindus pray, they take the personified gestures much further; they seek to be household servants of the king. After approaching the king, they bathe, wash, and feed the king as if the worshipper is a home servant of the king. These gestures are not a sacrifice, but rather homage and hospitality to god. *Puja* is modelled on the idea of making an offering or gift to a deity or important person and receiving their blessing in return. These acts are in some level a form of playing house with God—the image is waked, bathed, sung to, dressed, fed, and then put to bed. The act of worship involves an entire range of domestic acts, including the love and devotion of family.

Every day, the priests serve the image of the god through a daily offer of sixteen activities before the deity. There are variations in this *puja* method, such as a simple *puja* with five steps or a complex *puja* with sixty-four steps. (1) Meditate on the deity; (2) The deity is invited to the ceremony from the heart; (3) The deity is offered a seat; (4) The deity's feet are symbolically washed; (5) Water is offered so that the deity may wash its mouth; (6) Offer the deity water to drink; (7) Water is offered for symbolic bathing; (8) Clean clothes are offered to the image and ornaments affixed to it; (9) Putting on the sacred thread.

Then there are the five offerings corresponding to the five senses: (10) Sandalwood or *kumkum* are applied to the image; (11) Flowers are offered before the image; (12) Incense is burned before the image; (13) A burning lamp is waved in front of the image; (14) Food, such as cooked rice, fruit, clarified butter, and sugar, is offered (*naivedya*). Traditional home worship focuses on these five.

Prayers and personal petitions are offered. A bell is rung in a Hindu temple, during the waving of light in front of the deity, while bathing the deity and while offering food. During home worship, the bell is one of the basic components of the service. (15) Betel leaf is offered; (16) Taking leave by bowing or prostrating themselves before the image to offer homage.

Some contemplative paths replace much of the tangible sensory service with meditations and yogic practices. Tantric practices place the emphasis on the intentions and visualizations during worship. Ordinary worship, however, does not require this intentionality.

There are specific ways for different gods. For instance, Vishnu likes

adornments, and offering of flowers, garlands, and scents; Shiva likes *abhisheka* (the continuous pouring of a liquid, usually water, milk, or honey over the Shiva *linga*).

Home Worship

Traditionally, since there are no required temple services, observant Hindus have a shrine at home, either in its own room or in a small cabinet built for that purpose. Statues (*murtis*) of the family gods are kept there. There is also a plate for the offerings, a main lamp and smaller lamps, bowls for bathing the deity, a towel for the deity, spoons for offerings, a bell along with containers to keep the oil, wicks, matches, camphor, spices, and *kumkum* and sandalwood powders. There are kits for sale that provide all that is needed for worship; these items range from inexpensive plastic to various quality metals and for those who can afford it, marble and stone-carved worship sets are sold. At least one member of the household typically performs home *puja* every day—morning and evening.

How is *puja* celebrated? *Puja* includes three important components: *darshan*, the seeing of the deity; *puja*, or worship, which includes offering flowers, fruits, and foods; and *prasadam*, retrieving the blessed food and consuming it. By performing these sacred acts, the worshiper creates a relationship with the divine through his or her emotions and senses. An essential part of *puja* for the Hindu devotee is making a spiritual connection with the divine.

During a household *puja*, the head of the household chants prayers to the god or goddess. The accoutrements used include an incense burner, a tray with flowers, fruits, and food. The worshippers offer the deity a seat, wash its feet, and give it water. Many times, the image is also bathed, clothed in new garments, and embellished with ornaments. Perfumes and ointments may be applied, along with flowers and garlands placed before it. Incense is burned, and a lighted lamp is waved in front of the deity. Foods such as cooked rice, fruit, butter, and sugar are offered. Family members bow before the image, sip the water they have given the god, and receive a portion of cooked food. The food and water are now considered to have been blessed by the deity for the devotees. It is for this reason that one would remove one's shoes when entering a Hindu home. Shoes are always

removed at temples and holy sites as a sign of respect.

Puja is a multi-sensory experience. One observes the offering of the lighted lamps, touches the ritual objects and feet of the deity, hears the ringing of the bells and the sacred chants that are recited, smells the incense, and tastes the blessed food offered at the end of the ritual.

There are many rules for how to do home *puja* properly and each of them has a Jewish parallel. One needs to avoid *puja mandirs* in the bedrooms or near a toilet. One must avoid broken idols or torn pictures. For Shaivites, one can only have a Shiva *linga* at home, if one can commit to the daily schedule of worship.

The worship day starts before the home *puja*. Devout Hindus first say a short morning prayer before sunrise followed by the *gayatri* mantra and lastly, a ritual to drive out evil. Then, the devout repeats god's name (*japa*) with prayer beads (*mala*) before proceeding to worship. One closes one's eyes and sits quietly in order to turn to God. The devotee makes an intention of performing ritual offerings. *Sankalpa* is the first step in worship. Before beginning worship, the devotee mentions the place, date, and time and declares that he is beginning worship. The *devata* being worshiped, the mode of worship and purpose of worship are also mentioned. Every *puja* involves the critical step of invoking or bestowing *prana* (life force). What the mantra really does is invoke and implore the spirit of God to reside in the image and accept the worship being offered. During the invocation, the image is said to be given life. Without this, the divine cannot be invoked in the image.

Afterwards, the devotees offer water, lamp, camphor, bell, and finally, a meditation or prayer. The closing prayer is usually a form of asking for pardon for mistakes, stating that the devotee does not possess full priestly knowledge of rituals, has insufficient pious conduct, and that the worship should be accepted because the devotee turns to god as a refuge and protector.

Prasada and Naivesyam

Hindus make an offering of food to the Lord and later partake in it as *prasada*—a holy gift from the Lord. What is offered to God is *naivedyam*. When it comes back, it becomes *prasada*. In a material sense, *prasada* is a

processional exchange between a human devotee and the Divine God, in which, a devotee makes an offering of a material substance such as flowers, fruits, or sweets—which is called *naivedya*. The deity then enjoys or tastes a bit of the offering. This now-divinely invested substance is called *prasada* and is received by the devotee to be ingested or worn. It may be the same item originally offered, or material offered by others and then redistributed to other devotees.

A flower for one's sense gratification is material, but when the same flower is offered to the divine by a devotee, it is spiritual. Food taken and cooked for oneself is material, but food cooked for the Supreme Lord is spiritual *prasada*, becoming divine mercy as a means for purification and spiritual development. Think of it as *sharayim* (leftovers) from a Hasidic rebbe, if the rebbe ate from the dish then it is blessed.

Critique of Puja in the Purva Mimamsa School

Mimamsa thinkers have long criticized *puja* by refuting the idea that gods have material bodies, and therefore, they are unable to eat the offerings made to them, are incapable of being pleased and unable, as well, to reward worshippers. They conclude that the gods are neither corporeal nor sentient and thus, unable to enjoy offerings or own property. For this, they appeal to empirical observation, noting that offerings do not decrease in size when given to the gods; any decrease is simply due to exposure to the air. The *Mimamsa* school were defeated in debate at the hands of Sankara which led to theirs being a minority view. Nevertheless, it still survives among Hindu rationalists of all types as well as among Hindu modernists. [\[2\]](#)

CONCLUSION

Both Hindus and Jews no longer give sacrifices, but Jews have never rebuilt the ancient Temple and substituted the words of the *amidah*, the silent prayer, for sacrifice. Hindus build an abundant number of altars and have substituted flowers, fruit, and water for ancient sacrifices.

Returning to the differences, in Judaism, Jews do not have a devotional image to focus on. Jewish prayers are about reciting the liturgy and for

some, the attempt at intention while praying. The length of the obligatory Jewish prayer makes the recitation an end unto itself, while the contemporary emphasis on communal worship precludes much of the development on the sensorial experience of the divine.

Jewish worship offers less engagement with the senses of smell, sight, touch, or taste; focusing on hearing and speaking. However, the Torah procession, the ritual objects of *tallit* and *tefillin*, and the four species sometimes play such a role. Most Hindus offer short five to fifteen minutes of prayers and blessings while the Jewish morning service is a fixed routine of never less than half an hour. There are many ashrams that require extended hour-long daily worship of recitation (as in the novel *Eat, Pray, Love*); however, these are not for the average person.

In the most unlikely setting of the Central Bus Station in Jerusalem, I met two young professional British Hindu women originally from India. They just visited the Kotel and Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif that morning. Assuming that the sight of Jewish worship would be different from a Hindu temple, I asked them: “What did you both think?” They answered that they very much liked the simplicity. One of them explained to me that she always found Hindu temples too overwhelming in color, sight, smell, sounds, and activities. She found the Temple to be a nice contrast, which permitted her own personal worship.

AARTI AND DIWALI

The ancient sacred city of Varanasi—originally called Kashi, then called Banaras—located at the banks of the holy Ganga River hosts a fire ritual (*Aarti*) twice daily on the shore. Every tourist guidebook and travelogue mentions the Ganga Aarti as essential in any visit to India, earning a place on many bucket lists of things to see before one dies.

Ganges Aarti in Varanasi

The Ganges Aarti of waving lamps is performed daily in the evening by a group of priests at the Dashashwamedh Ghat near the famous Kashi Vishwanath Temple dedicated to Shiva. The Dasashwamedh Ghat is arguably the oldest and most spectacular *ghat* in Banaras. Legend has it that Brahma

sacrificed ten horses here; hence, the name means that in Sanskrit.

The entire ritual of the Ganges Aarti is performed by handsome and well-built priests led by a head priest in a well-choreographed manner between the priests. An announcement at 7:00 p.m. indicates the beginning of the Aarti, followed by a forty-five-minute display of an act of *puja* consisting of incense, prayer bells, flowers, handkerchiefs, and conch shells culminating in the harmonized waving of large multi-tiered lamps with 101 wicks, and then the offering of camphor. The performances are based on the simple lamp lighting of everyday Hindu ritual, but the public version adds a full orchestra and drum beats, uses five photogenic priests instead of one and then enhances it with choreography, which yields a contemporary ritual spectacular as memorable as Bollywood.

The hundreds of small flames look amazing under the night sky. The audience watches from boats on the river, and then each spectator lights a candle set in a paper bowl before setting the bowl into the water to float away. When the Ganges Aarti ends, the scene falls silent.

In the last decade, in each significant town along the route of the Ganges every morning and evening they perform a similar Aarti to the river.

For many who visit India, this is the one Hindu ritual they witness. The government brought Prince Charles, Duke of Wales, along with the Duchess of Cornwall, to see a river Aarti. Aside from the choreography, the attraction is that it is a public ritual of Hinduism that does not involve entering a temple, standing before a statue of a god, or having to personally make an offering.

Many tourists think the performance of the lighting ceremony in Varanasi lets one in to see one of Hinduism's most hidden and sacred rituals. To use as an example, a visiting Jewish professor to Varanasi, who self-proclaimed that his Jewish education ended at the age of twelve, found the Aarti a profound entrance into the Hindu religion, like watching the Catholic Eucharist or Rosh Hashanah shofar blowing.

Contrastingly, the Brahmin professors at Banaras Hindu University, who themselves were deeply religious, told me not to bother with this performance. They all said that the public Aarti is a businessman performance paid for the Chamber of Commerce for the sake of generating tourism. A local Brahmin Sanskrit teacher who teaches foreign students found the current forms secular and commercial.

In conversation with scholars, both Western and local, I found out that this world famous public choreographed performance is, in fact, only about twenty years old, from the late 1990's, gaining status in the age of globalization of travel and web clips as a way of showing people a public side of Hinduism. Yes, it is a traditional ritual, but the public performance is more akin to the Chabad lighting of the Chanukah menorah in public places, a public communal ritual good for local character and charm, than a significant religious observance. Lighting Chanukah candles is certainly important and traditional, but the public performance of it is a recent addition to the public sphere.

Aarti Performance

Aarti—literally meaning removal of darkness—consists of waving the ghee or camphor lamp before the god, statue, or item to be blessed. Aarti is a basic ritual performed at the end of daily *puja* in the home, as part of most temple offerings, and to bless a special occasion or new object. Aarti also refers to the songs sung in praise of the deity when offering the lamps.

One or more cotton wicks, always an odd number, are put into the oil and then lit, or camphor is burnt instead. The lamp is generally laid on a metal plate along with flowers and incense. It is waved clockwise and then back around a person or deity. In doing so, the plate or lamp is supposed to acquire the power of the deity. The priest circulates the plate or lamp to all those present. They cup their down-turned hands over the flame and then raise their palms to their forehead. In doing so, the purity and blessing passes from the *deva's* image to the flame, which, in turn, is passed to the devotee. (Indian Jews use similar motions for Shabbat candles.)

Aarti is probably descended from the Vedic concept of fire rituals, or *homa*. The ritual is explained by a diverse symbolic understanding that the fire ritual represents a purified state of mind, an offering of self, humility and gratitude, and one's intelligence, which is offered through the concern with precise ritual order. It symbolizes the five elements: space, wind, fire, water, earth; therefore, in many versions, there will be five items chosen to represent these elements set on the Aarti plate. Aarti can be an expression of many things including love, benevolence, gratitude, prayers, or desires, depending on the object it is done in front of. For example, it can be a form

of respect when performed to elders, prayers when performed to deities, or hope when performed for homes or vehicles. It is a common practice to perform aarti to inanimate objects like vehicles, electronics, or new homes as a gesture of showing respect and praying that this object would be a blessing and help one excel in life.

Judaism sanctifies everything with a blessing recited before most activities—daily prayer, in synagogue worship, and home ritual. Many of those blessings have an accompanying tangible ritual action and religious object to go with it. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1800–1888) said: “A truth, in order to produce results, must be impressed upon the mind and heart repeatedly and emphatically . . . [S]ymbolic words and actions are necessary so that they may become indelibly stamped upon the soul, and thus preserved for yourself and for others.”^[3] Judaism uses visual and tangible representations of its many lofty values and ideals, which words alone cannot adequately describe.

Usually, Jewish ritual is performed with one ritual object at a time—tallit, *tefillin*, Sabbath candlelights, Chanukah lamp—but without combination of color, smell, and sound. Shofar blowing has sound, Shabbat and Chanukah candles are light, and the Sabbath and festival table are food. The Passover Seder, however, is closer to a Hindu ritual in that it has a full gamut of rituals as does the especially well constructed closing of the Sabbath Havdalah service of fire, pleasant smelling item, cup of drink, ritual plate, and song.

However, Rabbi Hirsch notes that unlike Hinduism, “God does not appear to us as a visible being” since the Jewish God is intangible. The symbols remind us of God as “a visible reminder of God,” as a “means which directs your attention from the visible to the invisible.” Hirsch expresses that Jews do not see God, yet He appears through the ritual.^[4]

Diwali

The high point of the year on the Ganges is the Aarti during the festival of lights—*Deva-Diwali*, *Deva-Deepawali* or Kartika Poornima—which is celebrated on the fifteenth lunar day of Kartika (November–December). During this time, lights are lit all along the river at every *ghat*, and every

home and store sets out lights, which need to be lit before midnight. The festival has a large public civil religion component of light, sweets, and giving to the poor.^[5]

This is the most popular day for bathing in the Ganges at Varanasi. The devotees also take a bath in the evening during moonrise and offer worship by way of six prayers. After the holy dip in the river, the devotees offer flowers to the purifying waters, light incense sticks and earthen oil lamps to seek her blessings. This ritual of lighting oil lamps (*Deep*) and floating it on the gently flowing waters of Mother Ganga is known as *Deep Daan* (*Daan* simply means charity or donation done without any motive of self-interest). Charity, done here besides the River Ganga to the needy and poor without any expectation of a return favor, is said to bring many blessings, health, wealth, and prosperity. Any form of violence is prohibited on this day. This includes shaving, hair-cutting, cutting of trees, plucking of fruits and flowers, cutting of crops and even sexual union.

Diwali, the festival of lights, is celebrated throughout India, but there is a difference in origin, myth and the way in which it is celebrated between Northern and Southern India. The Deepavali celebration is a four-day festival in South India commemorating the victory of Lord Krishna over demon Naraka. Diwali in North India commemorates the return of Lord Ram to Ayodhya after his exile.

The day after Diwali in North India is Govardhan Puja, the day that Krishna lifted the mountain over his head, while in South India it is celebrated as the day that King Mahabali returns to earth to visit his subjects. The next day is Bhai Dhooj in North India and Yama Dvitiya in South India when sisters invite brothers to their home; both North and South have the same practice but with different names and stories.

Despite the different stories, it is a festival of peace, health, happiness, and love as shown in the many poems and songs taught in schools. "May the lamps of love and devotion burn brightly in your hearts. May the light of understanding shine in your minds, May the light of harmony glow in your home. May the bright rays of service shine forth ceaselessly from your hands. May your smile, your words, and your actions be as sweet as the sweets of this festive season. May Maha Lakshmi bring you the true wealth of peace, health, happiness, and love."^[6]

HINDU TANTRA AND KABBALISTIC JUDAISM

There are many books and websites that create parallels between Kabbalah and Tantric chakras. These sites combine a chart of ten *sefirot* and a new age chakra chart. These chakra charts are part of a modern Western appropriation of Hindu ideas, which became Western *tantra*, as well as a guide to good sex. However, let us turn to the historical forms.

Tantra

In actual Hinduism, a *tantra* is an intention to a higher realm or visualization while performing a ritual; it is similar to when a Kabbalist intends that a ritual reaches a sefirah.

The name *tantra* is given by scholars to a style of meditation and ritual in which thought and action are combined. *Tantra* literally means woven because the practice of tantric intentions weaves together a religious action with a specific intention. A tantric intention transcends the simple intention of performing the required ritual in relation to the divine as an intentional act (*kamata*) or as a commanded act (*samkalpa*). In *tantra*, one has to have a specific intention during a ritual to a vision or higher realm.^[7]

Similarly, when a Jewish text requires a believer to have an intention that goes beyond intention to do a *mitzvah*, a *kavvanah* for a *mitzvah* for a *sefirah* such as the *Shekhinah* or *Tiferet*, it is a form of *tantra* since it requires one to weave a specific religious action with a specific intention.

The real definition of *tantra*, however, is the practices contained in the vast Agamic literature; *tantra* is another name for the Agamic literature that contains the basic temple ritual and daily worship rituals that most Hindu denominations use. Hindu temples do not follow the Vedas or even the Sutras, rather they follow this vast Agamic corpus, which contains both ritual and intentions. Most of these works remain untranslated into English. There are over sixty major tractates of Agamic literature from the second to tenth centuries—a period that is roughly co-terminus with the Talmud—this number is greater than all the earlier Hindu texts combined, and it includes hundreds of minor tractates.

Trying to understand Hindu ritual without the Agamic literature is like going into a contemporary American synagogue and trying to understand

the service using just Leviticus without the Talmud. The Agamic literature has four major realms (1) the rules of temple buildings, (2) ritual worship, (3) philosophy of worship, and (4) requirements of intentionality. The word *tantra* is used for the latter rules of intentionality.

Tantra comes in two main forms. The mainstream traditional form is used by ordinary men and women; this is called the right-handed path and requires a specific vision or intention while performing a ritual.

The second form, called the left-handed path, is used by ascetics, antinomians, lay movements, and forgotten cults. It may involve violating mainstream practice by eating meat, drinking alcohol, or having impure sex. Western *tantra* picked up these aspects a hundred years ago and now American New Age practitioners create Tantric sex manuals.

However, the overwhelming majority of *tantra* is merely the equivalent of kabbalistic intentions. Some texts call these two forms the outer and inner paths, or limit the term *tantra* to the second form—which they call Shakti *Tantra*, while merely calling mainstream Vaishnavite Pañcaratras or Shaivite *Tantra* ordinary practice.

David Gordon White, historian of *tantra*, states that *tantra* was the predominant religious paradigm for over a millennium—with its idea of microcosm, spiritual energies, and divination of the body. *Tantra* influenced *bhakti*, popular religion, devotionism, and Vaishnavism and completely blurred the lines between *tantra* and non-*tantra*. So too, Kabbalah was the predominant religious paradigm that influenced the Jewish liturgy, the performance of the rituals, and the worldview of Judaism.

Mainstream Tantra

David Gordon White, seeking to capture the essence of *tantra*, offers the following definition: “*Tantra* is that Asian body of beliefs and practices which, working from the principle that the universe we experience is nothing other than the concrete manifestation of the divine energy of the godhead that creates and maintains that universe, seeks to ritually appropriate and channel that energy, within the human microcosm, in creative and emancipatory ways.”^[8]

There is a common list of features shared by all versions of *tantra*,

including: the ritual worship of deities, use of mantras, visualization of and identification with a deity, ritual use of mandalas, analogical thinking (including microcosmic or macrocosmic correlation), and the channeling of negative mental states

Tantra can apply to any act when the two aspects of consciousness and matter are combined—*purusha* and *prakriti* or their personified forms Shiva and Shakti. *Tantra* works by natural means, based on the Indian system of *Samkhya*, in which man and nature are separate. At liberation, the self becomes distinct from nature and realizes itself to have the divine qualities of Shiva while remaining ontologically distinct.

Moshe Idel, retired professor of Kabbalah at the Hebrew University, presented the theosophic Kabbalah of the *sefirot* as a series of enchanted chains or a realm of a mesocosmos envisioned between humans and the infinite divine. Medieval pietists studied Kabbalah to know how to perform worship and ritual acts with proper intentions and visualizations. The goal was to unite the *sefirot* of malkhut and *Tiferet* as male and female or to combine other aspects of divine energy. Sometimes, the goal was to bring down energy and power (*ruhaniyut*) and other times the goal was to cleave to the divine. Idel showed how kabbalists used in their practice circles, colors, visualized divine names, and microcosmos.^[9]

Idel distinguished between the magical-ecstatic Kabbalah, which seeks power and experience, from the theosophic Kabbalah, which seeks union with the divine. In a similar manner, the anthropologist Geoffrey Samuels distinguishes between the *tantra* intentions that give power and pleasure in the higher worlds as opposed to those that help with liberation.

The unity of the Tetragrammaton and Lordship, better known as a unity of *Tiferet* and malkhut, is similar to a union of Shiva and Shakti. This intention is realized in the prefatory statement before ritual in a post-Lurianic world “In order to unify the Holy One Blessed be He and his *Shekhinah* (*Leshem yichud Kudsha Brich-hu u’Shekhinteh*)’.

A unification (*yihud*) is similar to the common *tantric* preface to worship, which notes the need to unify Shiva and Shakti. In this preface, the believer performing the ritual unifies the great deity Shiva and his consort

Shakti, the male and feminine principles. I must note at this point that most followers of Shaivism consider this unity two parts of the same divine. Their theism centers on Shiva; all consorts, family members, and entourage members are considered aspects of the one god Shiva. Hindus are asking for the unification of the male and female divine energies as mapped out on a celestial realm, with microcosmic correspondences in the body and the ritual.

Tantra converts ritual into acts that change the cosmos and requires an intention to enact the unity; in the same way, Kabbalah converts *mitzvot* into mysteries. Nahmanides, Bahye, and later, *Nefesh HaHayyim* accept the concept that “God needs human worship” (*avodah tzorech gevoha*). For example, *Sefer Ha-Bahir* writes: “Why is [a sacrifice] called a korban? Because it brings close [mekarev] the forms of the holy powers.” “Sacrifice is a pleasant smell indicating a descent of the divine, thus it is said, ‘and he descended’” [Lev. 9:22].^[10]

Visualization of Light and Flames

An example of tantric meditation on light is the practice *Jayakhya Samhita*. As in kabbalistic meditation, the practitioner should see the image as the size of the world, glowing, and perform the meditation while saying the appropriate mantra:

Meditating on the god whose form is flames, whose splendor is like a thousand suns, covered with millions of flames, spewing flames from his mouth, [the practitioner] should fill the entire universe up to the World of Brahma with that [visualization]. He should flood the directions, making them blaze with the splendor of his mantra, and meditate upon the entire circle of the earth baked, like a clay pot, by the fire of his mantra, [The practitioner] should join the five letters . . . in sequence together with five other letters.^[11]

The *Jayakhya Samhita* continues by promising a lack of sickness or death, showing that even after cleaving to the infinite the soul is distinct from the infinite, as in Kabbalah. “Having made [himself] indistinguishable from the Lord, the soul is the agent of undiminished action. In this way he

has produced a body that is supreme in liberation and enjoyment, having the appearance of pure crystal, bereft of old age and death.”^[12]

Compare this with Jewish Kabbalist, Isaac of Acco, thirteenth-century Meirat Eynayim:

You should constantly keep the letters of the Divine Name in your mind as if they were in front of you, written in a book with Torah (Ashurit) script. Each letter should appear infinitely large. . . . When you depict the letters of the Divine Name in this manner, your mind’s eye should be directed toward the Infinite Being (Ein Sof). . . . Your gazing and thought should be as one. This is the mystery of true attachment. You may ask why one should bind his thoughts to the Tetragrammaton more than any other name. The reason is that this Name is the cause of causes and the source of all sources. Included in it are all things, from *Keter* to the lowliest gnat. Blessed be the Name of the glory of His kingdom forever and ever.^[13]

The Body

In his book *The Tantric Body*, Gavin Flood, a leading expert on the normative *tantra*, explains *tantra* as the weaving together of the material and mental and through practices that may involve yoga, ritual, reading, or visualization, in which the body is formed into a pattern. Flood finds all *tantras* have in common an “entextualization of the body”—that is to say, they are read on the body. They also work by placing desire in the service of the ritual word to gain power and energy.

What is the process of knowing? If one’s attention is completely focused on an image or deity, a jar or another object, without any distraction, the mind is completely transformed into the shape of that object, as long as it holds that object. Thus, with complete concentration on the Lord, the mind is shaped into the image of Him, with all His qualities. The worshipper places different parts of the body of the divinity on the corresponding parts of his own body and imagines that he has acquired a new divine body. Again, in another rite, the worshipper imagines that each of the component elements of the body is absorbed in the next higher element until all are merged in the Supreme Power of whom man, as a

compound of such elements, is a limited manifestation.

The sixteenth-century rabbi, Hayim Vital, describes a unification (yihud) that presents a correspondence between the limbs of the body as corresponding with the ten *sefirot* of Kabbalah. One visualizes and focuses on an image of ten versions of the divine name that vary based on ten vowel signs. In his system, these names correspond with the cosmology of ten *sefirot* and the human body. If accomplished correctly, then one gains supernal merit, powers, and blessings. Esoteric practices such as Lurianic Yihudim are nearly theoretically identical to the Hindu concept of *tantra*, where one visualizes unities that bring divine energy into the human microcosm.

Chaim Vital (sixteenth century) writes in his *Shaarei Kedushah* that the true body is the spiritual body, corresponding to Judaism's 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments.

A person's body is not the actual person; the body is merely a garment the soul wears . . . The same way that a tailor will make physical garment in the shape of a body, God similarly made the body, which is the garment of the soul, in the shape of a soul, with 248 limbs and 365 tendons . . . (corresponding to) 248 spiritual limbs and 365 spiritual tendons. (*Shaarei Kedusha* 1:1 *Zohar* II, p. 162b)

Yantra

Tantric practice uses charts, mandalas, concentric circles, and a god's eye map of reality. Sri Vidya is a Hindu Tantric religious system devoted to the goddess as Lalita Tripurasundarī ("Beautiful Goddess of the Three Cities"). In the principally Shakta theology of Sri Vidya, the goddess is supreme, worshipped in the form of a mystical diagram (*yantra*), which is a central focus and ritual object composed of nine intersecting triangles, called the Sri Yantra or sricakra. The nine realms are further arranged as forty-three smaller triangles with a boundary of eight levels. While none of its elements have the same numbers as the Kabbalah, it is still a similar path of meditative focus and visualizations. The divisions and subdivisions are similar in idea to kavvanot of Safed, with *sefirot* within *sefirot*.

Guru Worship and Hasidic Rebbes

I am not going to deal with the vast range of Bengali and Kashmir *Tantra* in this chapter, but I do want to include one of the *tantras* made famous as one of the 1916 translations of Shakti *Tantra* by Arthur Avalon (Sir John George Woodroffe, British orientalist and lawyer, 1865–1936). This *tantra*, called *Secrets*, comes from the *Kularnava Tantra* (c. 1150), it teaches a *tantra* of guru devotion; in it, the guru is like a deep well from which one can and should draw forth wisdom and blessings, taking advantage of his rare presence to advance oneself on the spiritual path. The scripture opens with a single question posed by Shakti, the Mother of the universe, as to how all souls may attain release from sorrow, ignorance, and birth. The theistic, singular God, Lord Shiva answers, saying in the verses of the *Kularnava Tantra* that one can only be liberated through the guru and that the devotee should worship at the guru's feet.

There is One Real. Call it Shiva. All embodied souls, *jivas*, all the born creatures, are portions of Me, like sparks of the fire. But human birth is the most important, for it is then that one becomes awake, aware of his state of bondage and the necessity of release. It is then that one is in a position to take steps for his liberation from bondage's hold.

All fear of distress, grief, avarice, delusion and bewilderment exist only as long as one does not take refuge in the satguru. All wanderings in the ocean of births, called samsara, fraught with grief and impurity, last as long as one has no devotion to a holy Shivaguru. (Chapter 1)

The feet are worshipped because the totality of the satguru is contained within his feet. Every organ in his body's inner astral body has its vital points, in this case, his inner mental, and soul are in his feet. By touching the feet, they touch the spiritual master.

In the Hasidic movement, the connection and binding of oneself to the zaddik is essential. The practice of visualizing of the rebbe begins in the earliest Hasidic texts, like the eighteenth-century *Yosher Divrei Emet* by Meshulam Feivish, and continues into the twenty-first century as a practice

among both the Satmar and the Lubavitch. However, Hasidim, as far as I know, do not especially seek to touch the rebbe's feet.

To take one example of these practices, let us look at Rebbe Nachman of Breslov. Like a guru, the rebbe is the source of connection and is referred to as the *nachal novea mekor chochma*—"the flowing river, source of wisdom" (Prov. 18:4).

The essential reason we travel to the true tzaddikim is in order to merit to teshuvah—to return to God—whatever our circumstances may be. However, if someone travels or goes to a Rebbe for any self-serving reason, such as to receive from him some sort of prestige or public position, he utterly fails to draw close to the tzaddik; for he is traveling there for his own glory. Rather, the essence of drawing close to the tzaddik is when one's intention is for God alone—so that the tzaddik may draw him closer to God and bring him back from the spiritual straits into which he has fallen. (Reb Noson of Breslov, Likutey Halakhos, Hil. Shabbos 7:21 [abridged], translated by Dovid Sears)

Rebbe Noson of Breslov pleads for a leader who will contain an aspect of Moses's soul to redeem the people since they cannot do it themselves. He writes:

Owing to our profound lowliness and weakness today, when the inner light of our faces no longer shines, no one can help us except that exceptional master and true leader who will be an aspect of Moses our teacher. One who will also be able to illuminate us with holy perceptions so that we might reach the true goal, which is to know and perceive You through the entire panorama of Creation. (Likutey Tefilos II, 28)

Kundalini Energies

Kundalini is a primal energy, or *shakti*, located at the base of the spine. Different spiritual traditions teach methods of "awakening" the kundalini for the purpose of reaching spiritual enlightenment. Kundalini is described as

lying coiled at the base of the spine, the Sanskrit adjective *kundalin* means “circular, annular or bowl, or as a noun for a coiled snake.” This awakening involves the Kundalini physically moving up the central channel to reach within the Sahasrara Chakra at the top of the head. Many yoga systems focus on awakening of Kundalini through meditation, pranayama breathing, the practice of asana, and the chanting of mantras.

The use of kundali as a name of Durga or of a Shakti appears as early as circa the eleventh century. The phrase serpent power was coined by Arthur Avalon when he published his translation of two 16th-century treatises on laya yoga (Kundalini yoga) under this title.

Kundalini Yoga focuses on awakening kundalini energy. The goal is to unite Shiva and Shakti in one’s own “energetic” or “subtle” body. One brings the Shakti Kundalini energy up through the chakras, where it unites with Shiva in the crown. Integrating this spiritual energy usually requires a period of careful purification and strengthening of the body and nervous system beforehand; this purification and strengthening uses yogic austerities like breath control, physical exercises, visualization, and chanting. Avalon describes the need to purify the elements that comprise the body. The human spirit is brought into conscious communion with the Divine Spirit because man is a microcosm, in that, whatever exists in the universe exists in the human person.

Sexual Tantra

There are also the Kaula sexual practices, which are also known as “the secret ritual,” that are performed with an external *shakti* of an actual sexual partner as opposed to the purely meditative practices which involve only one’s own internal spiritual energies. The role of the sexual Kaula ritual is to unite the couple, yogini (initiated woman) and siddha (initiated man), so that each induces in the other a state of permanent awakening. In their exalted state, the two are absorbed into the consciousness of the Self. By becoming united on all the levels, physical, astral, mental and even in their

consciousness, they reconstitute the supreme couple of Shiva and Shakti.

The same *tantra* points out that he must be of good character; in particular, he must not be lewd and given over to drink, gluttony, and womanizing. If he is so, he is not competent for this particular ritual.

The *Iggeret ha-Kodesh* (The Holy Epistle), a kabbalistic work written in the second half of the twelfth century, taught that the sexual relations between husband and wife are sacred. The work then provides more detailed explanations on how to achieve such sanctity.^[14]

The kabbalistic work follows Galen's theory that semen originates in the brain and travels down the spinal cord to reach the female, which is the opposite of the kundalini understanding. However, the supernal *Shekhinah* and the higher worlds are connected to reality through the union of husband and wife. Thus, not only is the *Shekhinah* a partner in the union, but the goal of the sexual act itself becomes to draw spiritual abundance and blessing down from the higher supernal *Shekhinah* to the earthly female below. The sexual act is an active, concentrated deed in which a human connects the upper and lower worlds. The author identifies four significant stages in the act: (1) purifying one's thoughts; (2) elevating one's thoughts; (3) devoted concentration; and (4) drawing down of influx or energy from above.

Through meditation, the mind is able to draw spiritual abundance from the upper worlds; this derives from the mind's upper source, and from this high, godly source, a person can attain elevated things through their mental capability alone. "When the mind returns from the upper world to the lower one, everything resembles one line, and the same supernal light is drawn downward by the strength of the mind." Applied to the sexual act, the *Holy Epistle* writes: "When a man unites with his wife, if his imagination and thoughts concentrate on matters of wisdom and understanding, good and worthy qualities, those thoughts have the power to create an image in the drop of sperm." Meditation is not simply contemplative, but can also change reality. The holiness of sexual union is therefore the full merging of the spiritual and physical realms.

AN INTENTION BOAT RIDE

During Diwali, the festival of lights, I took a nighttime boat ride on the

Ganges River to watch all of the different festive activities on the various *ghats*. A group of Sanskrit scholars of European origin chartered the boat and they brought along local Sanskrit scholars and a dozen European and American graduate students as well as the extended family of the boat owner. As scholars, they wanted to drive the boat past the 3 km of presentations done mainly for the sake of the public performance and out to the ends of the river where the traditional practices took place. In the chilly evening of moon-light, we floated past each *ghat*, each gaudily strewn in electric lights, each having its own temple and cultural personality. Those in the boat translated the songs and chants we heard, letting me know what was Sanskrit, what was Hindi, what was traditional, and what the textual sources were.

In the midst of the lights and sights of the shore illuminating the darkness of the river, I turned to one of the local Sanskrit scholars and asked: What happens when they make a mistake in the performance of the ritual? What happens if they make a mistake in the chanting or one of the lamps go out or if they do not light the correct number of lamps?

The Christian graduate student sitting next to me said: don't make fun, you're ridiculous; however, the Sanskrit scholar said they would have to perform a special ritual to correct the mistake. They don't usually make mistakes because they are all well trained, but when they do it would require an offering, although not a major one since the mistake was unintentional.

In Hinduism, ritual mistakes require atonement; however, there are differences between the types of mistakes and the intention of the mistake. In contrast, if one makes a mistake in a Catholic Mass, one just repeats or corrects the mistake. Even if one spills the chalice, the concern is desecration of the wine and its retrieval rather than with atonement for incorrectly carrying out the ritual. Hinduism and Judaism, are concerned with the exact practice of the rituals or else it is considered a mistake. [\[15\]](#)

There is an old joke about a Jewish child who visits Catholic neighbors and upon seeing the Christmas tree gets thrown out of the house. The Catholic father complains to the Jewish boy's father and says, "He saw our Christmas tree and started making fun." "Really, what did he say?" continues the Jewish father. The Catholic father replies, "He saw our tree

and started asking all sorts of ridiculous questions—which kinds of pine trees can be used for a Christmas tree? What’s the minimum required height? How close to the window does it need to be? What if the electricity goes out? Do too many decorations render it unfit? What if it’s under a neighbor’s balcony?!”

The joke would be lost in Banaras where rituals need to be done in very specific ways. The priest must light either 51 or 101 flames or else the ritual is not valid. The lights have to be of a specific kind, they have to be pure, the area needs to be pure, the chants must be exact, and the gestures and motions of waving the lamps must be the exact sequence or else one has not fulfilled the ritual.

Ritual

Everything used in ritual needs to be consecrated and purified or else it destroys the ritual. Hindu ritual distinguishes between items unusable due to impurity as opposed to those that have a defect. There are similar distinctions in Jewish law between a *nevelah* (died naturally) and a *terefah* (improper slaughter). An animal that is a *nevelah* imparts ritual impurity, whereas a defective *terefah* from an improper slaughtering does not.

One could also have a productive Hindu-Jewish discussion about feces and ritual. The Talmud and the *shastras* both ban rituals around human and animal feces, but neither one worries about droppings that no longer smell. Neither one influenced the other one; rather the logic of not doing ritual around smells creates a parallel.

Both worry about animals dying or running away between consecration and offering. Both worry about being touched by an impurity while doing a ritual. Both worry about little creepy things running by and creating impurity. The list of impurities from a human body has a great overlap because the human body only produces a finite number of emissions, flows, and liquids. Hinduism, however, is much stricter about ordinary saliva.

In the later Purva-*Mimamsa*, especially the writings of Jaimini (fourth century CE—Talmudic era) the efficacy of a sacrifice depends entirely on the correct performance and not on anything external. Neither intention for act nor intention for the gods matters. For Jaimini, sacrifice is an end in itself for sustaining the needs of correct performance by the priest—any ritual lapses

are dangerous. If one omits a syllable, he makes a hole in the cosmos; it sinks the heaven bound ship. Even a mistake in pronunciation may lead to the opposite effect.

According to David Haberman, professor of Hinduism, the *Puranas* literature is a theistic universe in which physical performance of ritual trumps knowledge and intentionality. (This is unlike the world of yoga and *tantra* where intention is essential.) Haberman explains how there is a distinction between two types of intention in some Hindu rituals. The first, *anubhava* is based on a classical dramatic tradition and is a natural expression of an inner state, and the second, *sadhana* is an intentional act done to achieve a change in inner state, usually imitating a famous *anubhava*, “thus the gods did, thus men do”—doing the action is transformative.

In the *Shiva Purana*, Shiva is Supreme Being, but his power is dispersed only to the one who does the ritual. Even the accidental performance of a ritual works. The famous case he cites is that of the accidental offerings on a *linga* of bilva leaves by accidentally dropping them.

Compare this to the Talmud: Rava said, “One who blows a shofar just for music’s sake, has nevertheless fulfilled the *mitzvah*, since doing *mitzvot* does not require the intent” (Talmud Rosh HaShanah 28a–b).

Mistakes

Because of my Jewish background, I am comfortable with lists in the Agamic literature that offer fifty types of mistakes in a simple ritual. I am equally comfortable with passages offering twelve remedies for the fifty mistakes.^[16] In synagogue rules, if the reader recites the verse incorrectly, it invalidates certain prayers. If you use the incorrect pronunciation or accent that changes the meaning of a verse, it invalidates the recitation.

In Hinduism, there are two types of sins—those done intentionally and those done unintentionally (*kamata* or *jnana* vs. *akamata* or *ajnana*) (the Hebrew equivalents would be *mazid* and *shogeg*). The unintentional sin can be undone with a recitation, but intentional sinning places the Brahmin outside society and possibly impure until the sin is corrected.

In addition, all Hindu rituals must be done with intention and resolve.

Similar to a classic Jewish distinction between intention for a command (*lishmah*) and intention about meaning and the divine (*kavvanah*), here the intention required is *samkalpa* (or *sankalpa*) meaning “resolve” or “intention,” as in the intention to achieve the desired goal.

A person practices *samkalpa*, which occurs prior to the performance of a ritual. They vow to perform a particular practice and specify length of time, time of day, place, and so forth. Although this need to vow in advance of a practice initially referred only to a spiritual practice, this has been extended in contemporary language to any such vow that requires a regular practice, such as a vow to regularly exercise. As in Judaism, vows must be verbalized and formulated precisely to show intention.

A major difference between the two faiths is that Hindu ritual does not have a word or concept of guilt. The language is one of avoiding punishment, the vice of dishonor, or the sense of shame. We see the classic distinction between shame cultures and guilt cultures.

By the eighth to ninth centuries CE epic Mahabharata, there is an internal sense of sin based on a direct relationship with a theistic God who watches what you do and knows your heart: “Thy heart is a witness to the truth or falsehood . . . you think that you alone have knowledge of your action. But you do not know that the Ancient, Omniscient one (Narayana) lives in your heart? He knows all your sins, and you sin in His presence” (section LXXIV, Sambhava Parva). To Jewish ears, this Omniscient God who knows your sins and bears witness to your actions is familiar from the Jewish High Holy Days liturgy.

So, what do you do for ritual mistakes in Brahmin texts? As stated in the 500 BCE Katyayana Srauta sutra: Rules for the Vedic sacrifices XXV.1.1 “for mishaps in rituals there is ritual atonement.” For a minor mistake, one needs to recite the *Purana*—sukta or the “bhur, bhuvah, and sveh” or the *gayatri* mantra. For major ones, there is an additional sin offering.

In general, in contemporary services, there is an extra Aarti (a waving of lamps and chant ritual) performed after Hindus finish prayers or auspicious rituals. It is performed to bring blessings but also to rectify any mistakes made during the whole process. It is also seen as a completion of the process.

For ordinary modern householders, if they are doubtful about what to do or think that they have made a mistake, then a theist Vaishnavite is likely

to chant Hare Krsna, Hare Rama.

Some modern versions are less ritualistic in orientation since, like in the Bible, one is told not to fear: “Krsna shall deliver you from all sinful reactions. Do not fear” (*Bhagavad-Gita* 18.66).

Other methods used in later eras for sins in general include confession, repentance, breath control, austerity, gifts to religious institutions, and pilgrimages. If one does decide to donate to a temple or feed the poor as a penance, then one has to do it as an oath (*vratas*), similar to the way Judaism considers pledges as oaths.

Adjusting to the times, new penances were made. Already in the BCE era, it was stated that “*Brahmans* who have studied *Dharmashastra* should prescribe a penance appropriate to the age, the time and the strength of the sinner; one should not prescribe an observance that will cause great distress to the sinner.” This has continued to this day. Just as Jews during the season of repentance do not roll in the gravel, or fast according to Hasedei Ashkenaz, so too contemporary penances are updated. Now a vow of money is preferred in both faiths.

As a side point, the same works on sacrifice that deal with ritual mistakes and corrections, the *Kalpa Vedanga*, fifth century BCE, also contains the geometry of altars along with mathematical deductions for the geometry. Works corresponding to the rabbinic tractate *Middot* (measurements) are the measurements used to build a temple. The India version, however, also contains real mathematical instruction because of their advanced knowledge—Indian numbers replaced Roman numerals through the Arabic intermediary texts that had all four forms of arithmetic: the zero, geometry including squaring the circle and vice-versa, and the Pythagorean theorem.

Another side point in this discussion of proper temple ritual behavior is that ethnographers point out how different families and groups in Hindu temples fight over who gets which honors in the ritual, who has what share, and which ethnic liturgy is used. A temple or *ghat* can be sacred to competing groups with different rules and pronunciations. Except for the purists, different pronunciations, hymn choices, and order of offerings are tolerated as non-mistakes; yet, in the struggles of temple politics—similar to synagogue politics—there are competitions for liturgy, honors, and whose priests get to be in charge for which service or part of the service.

Returning Home

By the time that the boat made its way back to our starting point after a full night on the river, almost all the boatmen and tourist trade had ended. I walked from shore to the quiet dark streets punctuated by kids setting off fireworks at a distance. I coaxed a bicycle rickshaw driver to get me home by first accepting to only go as far the gate of the university and then once there, he agreed to take me the extra kilometers home. Storekeepers swept in front of their stores by kerosene lamps and moonlight. But the required festival electric lights were still burning in homes—since the required amount of time of the lights, according to most Hindu practice was to burn until midnight, some expected the lights to remain lit until day break.

At the start of the evening, when they first kindled the lamps several hours earlier, most lit their lamps when the stars appeared, but it was still considered acceptable to light one's candles until midnight but not any time afterward. Think of the rules for lighting Hanukkah lamps. Two weeks later, I explained to a Hindu who spoke little English to leave my burning Hanukkah candles alone for the entire evening based on a Diwali analogy that the candles need to remain burning from sunset to midnight. She understood the ritual concept despite my broken Hindi.

THE TEMPLE AT TIRUMALA

When word reached the fervently Orthodox Jews in 2004 that the hair used in the wigs worn by Orthodox women originated in a Hindu temple and may not be kosher because of the hairs' heathen origins, pandemonium erupted. The controversy reached a fervor when Rabbi Shalom Elyashiv, one of Israel's preeminent authorities on Jewish law, or halachah, instituted a ban on wigs made from Indian hair out of concern that the hairs' original owners had used their hair for idolatrous Hindu religious ceremonies. Orthodox Jews from Brooklyn to Bnei Brak abstractly debated the intricacies of Hindu worship at a temple halfway around the world.

The *Jewish Press*, a Brooklyn newspaper covering the Orthodox community, warned readers against inadvertently violating the requirement, to distance themselves from anything that smacks of idolatry, even as they

follow the controversy in its pages. The weekly noted that the Tirupati temple is dedicated to “an idol named Venkateswara” but reminded readers not to speak the name aloud.

At the time, I received a call from a known rabbi in Israel who asked about how the hair in Tirupati, India, was offered; the rabbi unsuccessfully attempted to avert the expected panic that would ensue. The rabbi’s questions on the other end of the telephone were limited to whether the situation was similar to rabbinic conceptions of Greco-Roman sacrifice; the rabbi viewed the Talmud as a guide to contemporary Indian practice. I never expected to actually visit, a decade later, the sacred mountain of Tirumala, near Tirupati. Visiting the actual mountaintop offers a broader vista on many levels. My observations are in the context of the wig controversy.

Tirumala

Tirumala is fittingly at the top of a mountain as it translates literally to a sacred hill or high place. About three quarters of a mile up, one finds the Tirumala Venkateswara Temple dedicated to Lord Venkateswara Swamy (also called Sri Balaji). The nearest town in the valley is called Tirupati. It is the most visited pilgrimage place on earth and receives more visitors a year than the Vatican or Mecca. To put it into numbers, the site receives about 156 million visitors a year and averages about sixty thousand people on an ordinary day as well as hundreds of thousands during a festival. Until recently, it was also the wealthiest religious institution, maintaining an annual budget of \$167 million USD. The actual wealth is unknown, but it is generally thought to be much greater than the Vatican’s. Currently, they are using the wealth to support temples in the Hindu diaspora, so that now many American temples have a strong cultural influence from Venkateswara practice. [\[17\]](#)

During my stay in the city of a thousand temples, Kanchipuram, a town three and a half hours south of Tirumala, I observed a mini-celebration in the town center organized to noisily fete a group of male pilgrims who were beginning their four-day walk to Tirumala. While I did not walk with them, I was able to travel by car on well-paved back roads to reach the temple, which was about 138 km (86 mi) from my starting destination.

My local journey began at a hotel in Tirupati (sixteen miles away) that offered check-in times in twenty-four-hour units, since the overwhelming majority of the guests were flying in to visit the temple for a few hours and then fly out. The hotel had a full-time horoscope prognostication to determine the most auspicious time to visit the temple and, on the telephone, a direct call button for horoscopes right next to the room service and concierge buttons. The roll of horoscopes in Indian culture is not given much attention in the West but it is ever-present and further makes me think that I am walking into Abraham ibn Ezra's astrological world.

The ride up Tirumala Hill is straight up, 980 feet above sea level. The temple itself is located on a big plateau, about 10.33 square miles (27 km²) total in area. It comprises seven peaks and has a permanent population of eighteen thousand. The road up has overlook points and breakdown areas as well as emergency crews ready on hand.

When you arrive at the top, you enter a several mile area of housing such as dormitories, motels, bungalows, and apartments—all structures reaching no more than three stories. Also on the mountain top are playgrounds, concessions, a deer park, free medical clinics, and programs to help the deaf, blind, or handicapped. There is a shuttle bus that takes pilgrims around the area. The mountaintop city is almost like a large state college dormitory complex or fairgrounds or even, perhaps through a more utilitarian lens, like a shopping mall composed of various detached buildings in the 1970s.

Also on the mountaintop is a ring of semi-decent looking hotels, more clinics, and more activities for kids. This outer-ring area also has a wonderful museum with an amazing collection, nicely curated, which shows artifacts from the history of the temple mount, ancient religious objects, and temple life. Imagine if Jerusalem had never been conquered and never lost anything to war and could therefore display twenty-five hundred years of artifacts. The long display case contains a millennium of musical instruments, which in another museum could have been an entire exhibition room.

On the other side of the circle is a bazaar with wide avenues about five blocks by two blocks that sells religious pictures and statues to take home, souvenir devotional objects, and pietistic chapbooks. They also sold children's toys, especially big stuffed animals; it seems to be customary to

buy one for your children so that they enjoy the trip. There are also food concessions ranging from restaurants to pushcarts. There are pietistic performances; when I was there, men were singing *bhakti* hymns in Telugu on a small bandstand. Running down the center of the bazaar avenue is a sitting area covered by a corrugated metal roof for sun and rain protection where people take naps or eat meals.

The next area on the mountaintop was the holier temple region, flanked both ends by the *gopuram* (the large tower that marks a south Indian temple area). Inside was a large campus-sized, fenced-in center that includes all of the ancillary buildings to the temple. This area is surrounded by graded metal holding pens to be used on days of extreme visitation.

Then, there was a large block-long holy water tank as found in most south Indian temples, partly a symbolic beauty of the pool, partly a place to bathe before visiting the temple, and in this case, a roped-off area as a kiddie pool. It bordered a large open square with a stage for artistic performances at one end and a copy of the sacred statue inside the temple on the other end. Hindu purity law is similar to Karaite Jewish law and a pool of water is sufficient for purity.

Also included in this area is a large bakery of sweets; long lines dominated the first section. Each person who visits the temple gets a token for two sweet laddus as *prasadam*, which have a divine blessing from the deity, and they can buy more at the bakery. (Besan Laddu is a popular Indian sweet dish made of Besan [chickpea flour], sugar, and ghee, roasted till golden brown.)

To the right was the rather modest, double story golden temple, which is the goal of everyone's pilgrimage. The Sri Venkateswara Temple is dedicated to the Lord Venkateswara (also called Sri Balaji). Balaji answers petitions of those making requests and appears in dreams. His stories are richly described in his own *Purana* and countless legends.

The temple is surrounded by metal lattice grating in several concentric circles, creating a labyrinth holding pen for tens of thousands of visitors waiting the requisite five to ten hours to get into the temple. For those foreigners who want to enter, one must sign a form that one believes in the deity; they also now insist that one can only enter if one wears traditional clothes—sari for women, dhoti and bare chest for men. Tamil scriptures say that one can only attain atonement at this temple. (Tamil religion is more

about grace, merit, atonement, and penance, than self-realization.)

For Southern Hindus, this has become the abode of God, the place where one can directly see the divine, the closest most will ever get to a religious epiphany of the true Supreme Being. Originally, the temple was a Tamil holy site to Venkateswara, but it was identified by the important eleventh-century religious theologian Ramanuja as another incarnation of Vishnu. Venkateswara can be both one's personal representation of personal worship (Ishtava) and the place to see an epiphany of the Divine behind all specific deities.

Ramanuja taught that there is only one Supreme Being and the plurality of manifestations of the divine are only images. For Ramanuja, images are not just a human concession or a means to see the divine through a glass darkly but the very thing that allows one to come to the divine. The *Bhagavad Gita* (XI) describes a scene where Arjuna asks to see God's glory (as in Exodus), but here at Tirumala, it is theoretically everyone's chance to see God's glory. However, when crowded, the devotee may only get a three-to-four-second vision.

The time in the temple is exclusively for the brief vision of the statue. If one wants to offer personal prayers and make personal offerings, there is a place in the center courtyard to offer the traditional camphor flame, incense, flowers, and to make sacrifices of coconuts.

Tonsuring is in the Kalyana Katta building, but for the wealthier there are barbers set up in the hilltop hotels and guest cottages at the start of the hilltop so that they can bathe and get dressed in their hotel rooms.

The tonsuring building is a white brick building like a 1960's government or school building modified to be open for tonsuring and bathing. One enters it from the bazaar area and it is on the border between the bazaar and the temple area as preparation for going further into the temple compound. This building also has the queuing metal grating in which people sat and hawked soap, toothbrushes, shampoo, or even little kits—like a Jewish ritual bath (mikveh) kit. Inside the building, men are milling about and soaping their hair before the tonsure, mothers are hovering over the haircuts of their sons, and people are waiting for friends. On the left-hand side of my view was another corridor with men semi-dressed washing, showering, and bathing in preparation for the temple visit. Those who have had tonsuring have the treat of bathing in hot water, a luxury in India.

Men came into the building wearing their everyday clothes, started to disrobe to soap up their hair, had their hair shorn, and then went next door to wash, groom, and bathe. They emerged wearing purified white *dhotis*; the virtuous gave their clothes away to the mendicants. Unfortunately, the layout of the building and the transformation of the men into shaved uniform-wearing devotees made my Jewish eyes occasionally flash images of head shearing and showering upon entry to a concentration camp. The next step for the men in this case was to walk to the locker building to deposit their shoes and belongings in order to enter the long temple queue barefoot and pure.

As to the question of the relationship of sacrifice and tonsure: in a simple answer, they are not related. There are none of the signs of Hindu worship: neither camphor, incense, bell, nor fruit. There are no statues or images of the divine. People wore shoes; one would not make invocations or chants with shoes on. These points are not dependent upon language, translation, or regional difference. Pre-schoolers are already trained how to make offerings or worship. No local, regardless of education level, would confuse worship and tonsuring.

What is the meaning of tonsuring? Tonsuring shows one's love for the god by washing away one's past and starting anew. In some cases, someone with a closely shaved head is practicing celibacy. The hair is a symbolic offering of one's beauty, and in return, one expects a blessing. Tonsure can also be used for punishing people for severe crimes as well as a sign of giving up false-ego. According to the rules of the *samsara*, the rite of Chudakarana (tonsuring of hair) should be performed either in the first or the third year of the male child as a form of consecration.

Many Southern Indian temples have buildings for regular head shaving. In one city, I found the tonsuring building away from the temple tucked amid the concession stands. I bought a Diet Coke in the next concession while watching.

In Northern India, tonsuring is limited to auspicious occasions. One of the graduate students at Banaras Hindu University shaved his head as a mourning ritual for his grandmother. It is not uncommon to tonsure the head of a child after the death of a parent. The corpse, too, often receives the tonsure after death. A professor took her daughter to Tirumala for tonsuring as a way of creating an egalitarian equivalent to the boy's ritual. In

the Dharmashastra, widows are required to tonsure. In Southern India, tonsuring is common as a regular form of votive piety done on a regular basis.

Why tonsure at Tirumala? It is customary to make vows that are fulfilled at Tirupati. Vows are done partly because the religious life is filled with votive donations, especially to be healed from illness, for children, or as thanks. Partly, one makes vows as a spiritual preparation for entering the temple sanctuary. Among the contemporary votive offerings, some of the most popular are walking up the 11 km footpath to ascend the mountain, especially among those in their late teens and twenties (your luggage meets you at the top). Angapradakshinam is when pilgrims lie prostrate and then roll around the temple chanting the Lord's name. Tulabharam is offering one's weight in coins or other items such as gold, bananas, or sugar candy and is generally performed in honor of children. Niluvudopidi consists of offering to the Lord the ornaments, and so forth, that one is wearing when one takes the vow. The biggest source of income for the temple is from those who directly donate gold, jewels, or money; giving is meritorious. The museum also exhibited older forms of vows, such as committing to wearing shoes that are a bed of nails while ascending the mountain.

There is also a local temple myth of the source of the tonsuring practice found in a vernacular collection of temple stories, collectively called *Sthala Puranas*. In the story, Neela Devi gave her hair to Lord Vishnu after he was hit on the head and lost some hair. However, this is a local story, without authority, not widely known before the internet, and has little to do with the origins or function of this practice of tonsuring. The story is similar to a Hasidic homily on a long standing rabbinic practice. The homily did not generate the practice or even play a major role in how people understand it.

In a pair of scholarly articles by Benjamin Fleming and Annette Yoshiko Reed about the Orthodox wig controversy, they ask: What happens when Hinduism is confronted by someone who never heard about Hindu categories? According to this article, the rabbis paid "great attention to the details of the Hindu practices, but they interpreted them in conjunction with laws about Greco-Roman religion in the Mishnah and Talmud." They did not understand that tonsuring is not the same as *darshan* (vision of a deity) or an offering to a god, and that the cutting of hair can be likened to the washing of dirt from the body. They also did not understand that barbering

is not a temple ritual since it is done by low caste barbers—not Brahmin officiators. The rabbis did not ask questions about the entire pilgrimage process to the Tirupati Temple complex or what is done as part of the pilgrimage. In fact, one rabbi imagined he saw the hair actually brought as an offering and thought he was the only one acute to notice that the priest was sneaking the hair out to sell. Another rabbi thought that the stainless-steel collection drum was a deity that was being fed.^[18]

There was the prior assumption by the ultra-orthodox that this practice was idolatrous. The only question was whether there was an offering: “The pilgrims were asked: If your intention is to give a present why do you cut it here and therefore have to wait for hours in a queue? Why don’t you cut it at home and send it to the god?” They received answers that stated that it is more virtuous not to cut it at home and therefore “we want to cut it here because here we are in a holy place [. . .] and the idol loves our hair.” They ultimately concluded it was forbidden. Eventually, this first thought was overruled with more information. Leniencies to wear the hair were found by a variety of rabbis; some of their reasoning was based on the barber’s lack of intention for worship—first, with respect to tonsuring as a non-ritual act as defined in Greco-Roman terms and secondly, the lack of probability that one has the temple hair in one’s wig.

Most telling for the purpose of this book, Fleming and Reed note, “the halakhic discourse about *avodah zarah* has served to efface the structural and ritual similarities between Jewish and Hindu practices surrounding the cutting of hair.” There are fixed categories of the “selective appeal to the cultic practice of the Jewish past (i.e., sacrifice in the Jerusalem Temple)” and the pagan “non-Jewish ritual practice in the present.” There is no visual observation without the imposition of the rabbinic categories.

As noted above, there is no offering or placing of the hair near the *murti* (statue), which was two blocks away and surrounded by fences and security. Additionally, as Fleming and Reed note, it is worth studying why the rabbis’ worldview assumed that eyewitnesses, academics, and Brahmins were not telling them the truth. Even if the experts were telling the truth, they assumed that the average, unsophisticated worshipper confused bathhouse and temple, as if an unlettered Jew in the shtetl would not be able to tell mikveh from synagogue or yizkor candle from menorah. The

rabbis assumed that the average person could not tell the difference between a votive and sacrifice as if these practices were some ad-hoc rituals whose performance was not deeply embedded in the ritual practice of daily life or that the pilgrimage process would be confusing to its practitioners. To make matters worse, the rabbis did not realize that utilizing a Marathi speaking translator to communicate with Tamil and Telugu speakers and then further translating the discourse into broken English would be problematic.

Chief Priest

The chief officiating priest at the temple is a Brahmin with a doctorate in molecular biology. The approach is a dated modern Orthodox Judaism that encourages a Torah Umadda of becoming a rabbi doctor. His sons all have graduate degrees and the finances of the temple are administered by people who have MBAs. [\[19\]](#)

Temple Hinduism is about following the ritual procedure as prescribed in the Agamic books as interpreted by experts. These works have generally not been translated into English. The *Vaikhanasa Agama*, written by Sage Vikhanasa, is one of the four main *Vaishnava Agamas*. The *Vaikhanasa Agama* has two parts: the first part deals with rituals that are done in the temple whereas the second part deals with purification ceremonies that a priest must undergo. Temple Hinduism, and the observance of the ritual as interpreted by experts, resembles *halakhah* more than it does Hasidism.

According to the chief priest, the *Vaikhanasa Agama* is “not easily understood, even by Sanskrit scholars, because of its coded language. The verses have double meanings.” There are dichotomous meanings that require religious maturity. In creating a learned leadership, they conduct workshops on how to read the works. [\[20\]](#)

In the same interview with the chief priest, the temple rituals are described as a practice designed to keep the laymen’s physical senses satisfied and the process personal. The deity is treated as we would like to

be treated ourselves. As we all know, the dearest thing to man is man. We know God will be happy if we do for Him what we would do for ourselves.

When asked: How does one receive the most benefit from a pilgrimage to Tirumala? He answers, "If we pray to such a powerful Lord as Balaji for minor things like a promotion, a transfer, a seat in medical college or a marriage proposal, it is possible that these wishes will be granted," but the higher purpose is spiritual evolution. The article concludes with the chief priest's poetic moralization that "It is natural during this Kali Yuga (age of darkness) that we be more attracted to worldly pleasures and ignore spiritual pursuits."^[21]

NOTES

^{1.} C.J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Sadhu Mukundcharandas, *Hindu Rites and Rituals* (Amdavad, India: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 2007).

^{2.} Michael Willis, *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual: Temples and the Establishment of the Gods* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

^{3.} S. R. Hirsch, *Nineteen Letters of Ben Uzziel*, Bernard Drachman translation (New York: Fink and Wagnalls, 1899) 13th letter, 118.

^{4.} Ibid.

^{5.} Sadhu Mukundcharandas, *Hindu Festivals: Origins, Sentiments and Rituals*, 2nd ed. (Amdavad, India: Swaminarayan Aksharpith, 2010).

^{6.} Swami Chidanand Saraswati, at <https://www.parmarth.org/diwali-blessings-2012/>

^{7.} Gavin Flood, *The Tantric Body: The Secret Tradition of Hindu Religion* (London: I.B Taurus, 2006); Arthur Avalon, *Sakti and Sakta: Essays and Addresses on the Tantra Shastra* (Madras: Ganesh and Co., 1918); Geoffrey Samuel, *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra: Indic Religions to the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); David Gordon White, ed., *Tantra in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); David N. Lorenzen, "Early Evidence for Tantric Religion," in *The Roots of Tantra*, ed. Katherine Anne Harper and Robert L. Brown (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002). In addition, see also, Paul C. Martin "On the Comparative Realization of Aesthetic Consciousness in Kabbalah and

Tantra” in *Dharma and Halacha: Comparative Studies in Hindu and Jewish Philosophy and Religion*, ed. Ithamar Theodor and Yudit Kornberg Greenberg (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018) 189–202 who compares Kashmir Saivism, especially the doctrines of vibration and awareness of the Kabbalah.

[8.](#) David Gordon White, Editor’s introduction to *Tantra in Practice*, edited by David Gordon White (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 9. Edited by David Gordon White.

[9.](#) Moshe Idel, *Enchanted Chains: Techniques and Rituals in Jewish Mysticism* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2005).

[10.](#) Charles Mopsik, *Les grands textes de la Cabale, les rites qui font Dieu* (Verdier, Lagrasse: 1993); idem, “Union and Unity in the Kabbalah,” in Hananya Goodman (ed.), *Between Jerusalem and Benares* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 223–242.

[11.](#) *Tantra in Practice*. Edited by David Gordon White (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 513.

[12.](#) Ibid.

[13.](#) Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1982) 143.

[14.](#) Monford Harris, “Marriage as Metaphysics: A Study of the Iggereth ha-Kodesh,” *HUCA* 33 (1962): 197–220; Moshe Idel, “Sexual Metaphors and Praxis in the Kabbalah,” in *The Jewish Family: Metaphor and Memory*, ed. David Kraemer (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[15.](#) Ute Hüsken and Frank Neubert, eds., *Negotiating Rites* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012); Kathryn T. McClymond, *Ritual Gone Wrong What We Learn from Ritual Disruption* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[16.](#) Kathryn T. McClymond, *Ritual Gone Wrong: What We Learn from Ritual Disruption* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[17.](#) N. Ramesan, *The Tirumala Temple* (Tirumala: Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams, 1981); S. Krishnasvami Aiyangar, *A History of the Holy Shrine of Sri Venkatesa in Tirupati* (Madras: Ananda Press, 1939). The temple website is quite extensive <http://www.tirumala.org>.

[18.](#) Benjamin Fleming and Annette Yoshiko Reed “Hindu Hair and Jewish Halakha,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 40, no. 2, 199–234.

[19.](#) “Vaikhanasa Agama” at <http://kirtimukha.com/chinnamma/sahasra/VaikhanasaAgama.htm>

[20.](#) Ibid.

[21.](#) Ibid.

Chapter 8

Karma-Kanda

DHARMA

In Hinduism, *dharma* refers to the natural order of law of things; *dharma*'s traditional meanings include ethics, custom, good works, prescribed conduct, duty, virtue, cosmic order (human action sustaining the universe), religion, harmony, justice, and law. What upholds an individual, what sustains one, and what leads to happiness constitute the basis of *dharma*. It also signifies one's own obligations or duties, sacred law, moral order, practicing various truths responsible for integrated development, correctness, eternal principle, philosophy of life, and meritorious acts.

In the Vedas, we find the principle of *rta*, or divine ethical order, which humans are obligated to uphold through sacrifice and ceremony. *Dharma* includes Hindu law and signifies behaviors that are considered in accord with the order that makes life and universe possible (*rta*). The Upanishad literature defines *rta* as an internal sense of the individual, the accepted word later would be *dharma*. *Dharma* is used in the Upanishads and the later epic writings to harmonize the created divine order of the outward world with the internal make-up of an individual.

Compare to the words *Torah*, *mizvah*, or *halakhah*, which have a similar range of meaning. *Torah* means to teach or instruct and includes cosmic order, justice, law, ethics. *Mitzvah* means a commandment, ritual, ethical exhortation, and *halakhah* means to walk, path of life, or a fixed law. The overlap of meanings is extensive. As in Rabbinic Judaism, the Hindu cultural emphasis strongly favors community over individuality, but the individual's make-up, aptitude, skill, and spiritual capacity also play a strong role. Both religions are better described using their word for obligation than more commonly used geographic terms. Judaism (from the word Judean) is better described as the path of *Torah* than as Judeans. Similarly, Hinduism (from the country Hind) is best described as the path of *dharma*, specifically Santana *Dharma* (the eternal *dharma*), also proves to be a better description than the religion of the region of Hind.

From the Hindu perspective, the world in which we live has divine origins as an organized, designed created order. The *Rig Veda* refers to the way the divine has built ethical truth and order into the very structure of creation (*Rig Veda* 10:190.1). The unquestionable divinity at the base of reality, that is, all we can and cannot see here within the created domain, gives this world of people, animals and all life forms a non-severable connection to the divine. This idea of a divine—as creator and sustainer of the whole—domain is expressed as “The Omnipresent One [who] pervades souls and matter like warp and woof in created beings” (*Yajurveda* 32.8).

We find a similar weaving together of the very will of the divine with the fabric of creation in the Hebrew Bible. Genesis has an ordered divine creation declared as good. The Book of Proverbs has a divine fixed world for industrious moral responsibility and the prophecies of Isaiah, in the Jewish reading, are forever praising God for the world in which there are “wonderful things planned long ago” (25:1).

Dharma as Law

Hindu sources distinguish between those primary texts that are eternal truths heard by the seers (*sruti*) and those which are a part of the oral tradition (*smirti*). This distinction is structurally similar to the difference between biblical texts from prophecy and those from rabbinic oral law. The *dharma* was written down as a book of oral law, similar to the way in which the Mishnah and Talmud are written forms of an original Jewish oral law. Once the oral law was written, reading its written form became customary and, in turn, the tradition of searching for and reading oral law as applied to every generation based on local need.^[1]

Like Halakhic Judaism, Hindu *dharma* possesses legal rules, legal categories, and legal reasoning. A vast textual corpus and scholastic tradition, the *Dharmashastras*, are devoted to Hindu religious and legal duties, which are later formalized in the Mishnaic style *Dharmasutras*. In later centuries, it generated codes, summaries, and commentaries, similar to the unfolding of the rabbinic tradition.

The earlier *Dharmashastra* are a heard revelation, *sruti*. They are considered authoritative texts and in modern terms, the direct word of the

divine. By contrast, the later *Dharmasutras* are tradition and memory of tradition, of the oral tradition, Smritis. Teachings in Smriti texts are meant to be read and interpreted in light of changing circumstances over time, land, and personality. These texts must be flexible in response to changing history, geography, and communities. In addition, there is a third source of *dharma*, based on local custom or teachings as well as conventions, which is known as *acharya*.

There are variations across Hindu denominations in regard to what is classified as Shruti or Smriti. The *Bhagavad Gita* is considered by many Vaishnava as Shruti since God Krishna has himself spoken the *Bhagavad Gita*; however, a technical point of view would classify the *Bhagavad Gita* as Mahabharata, which is Smriti literature. There are several Tamil works also given a Shruti status. Some followers of Kashmir Shaivism consider *smirti* more important than *sruti*. (Some Hindu modernists reject the traditional *smirti* and seek to reform Hinduism by returning to *sruti*.)

Dharmashastra and Dharmasutras

There are two collections of legal rulings. The Original Vedic *Dharmashastra* from the first millennium BCE and later, more systematic and laconic *Dharmasutras* from the second to sixth centuries CE. For a Jewish analogy, imagine it as early oral law and then formalized Mishnah.

The earlier *Dharmashastra* refers to the Sanskrit treatises (*shastras*) on *dharma* from 600 BCE to 200 BCE. There are many *Dharmashastras*, variously estimated to be about eighteen to one hundred, with different and conflicting points of view. Each of these texts exist in many different versions.

The *Dharmasutras* were numerous, but only four texts have survived into the modern era. The extant *Dharmasutras* are written in concise sutra format with a very terse incomplete sentence structure, which are similar to many rabbinic texts that are difficult to understand and leave much to the reader to interpret.

The *Dharmasutras* can be called the guidebooks of *dharma* since they contain guidelines for individual and social behavior, as well as personal, civil, and criminal law. They discuss the duties and rights of people at different stages of life as well as judicial matters, and personal law such as

matters relating to marriage and inheritance. *Dharmasutras* generally do not deal with rituals and ceremonies since it is a topic that is covered in the *Shrautasutras* and *Grihyasutras* texts of the *Kalpa (Vedanga)*, meaning that unlike the rabbinic Mishnah, their laws of family law and damages are in separate volumes than their laws of prayer and festivals.

The Dharma Sutras

About twenty *Dharma*-sutras survived into the modern era as fragments of their original. The important ones are the Gautama Sutra, Baudhayana Sutra, and Apastamba Sutra. The central focus of these texts is how a Brahmin male should conduct himself during his lifetime.

Many of the teachings are in the ethos of a teacher instructing his student. The teacher should impart knowledge to him without holding anything back and with respect to any of the laws (Apastamba *Dharmasutras* 1.8.23–25 Translator: Patrick Olivelle).

Four *Dharmasutras* have been translated into English, but most remain in manuscripts: Apastamba (450–350 BCE) from South India is the best preserved among the *Dharmasutras*. The structure of the *Dharmasutras* begin with the Vedic initiation of a young boy followed by entry into adulthood, marriage, and the responsibilities of adult life that include adoption, inheritance, death rituals, and ancestral offerings. It includes punishment for various breaches of conduct and expiation for sins.

While biblical and *dharma* law are different systems, as an example of a *dharma* law that is similar to biblical law, let us look at the law of witnesses in which both traditions require two witnesses and sanction against false testimony. “Testimony during a trial: The witness must take an oath before deposing. A single witness normally does not suffice. As many as three witnesses are required. False evidence must face sanctions” (Gautama *Dharmasutras* 13.2–6). Compare this to Deuteronomy, “One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sinned; at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall a matter be establishment” (19:15).

The Dharma-shastras

The *Dharmasutras* are aporphistic like the Mishnah. They are much more elaborate in their scope than *Dharma-sutras*. The writers of *Dharma-shastras* acknowledged their mutual differences, and developed a doctrine of consensus reflecting regional customs and preferences.

Scholars think that almost 90 percent of the *Dharma-shastras* have been lost, those that survived include: (1) The Manusmriti (c. second to third century CE) is the most studied and earliest metrical work of the *Dharma-shastra*. Almost all authors refer to Manu as the first lawgiver; however, the Manu Smriti in its present form was probably compiled much later. Few people place legal authority in Manu. In fact, a point of contention arises when non-Hindus try to cite Manusmriti as having any bearing on Hindu practices and beliefs today, where it is very little indeed.

(2) The Yajnavalkya Smriti (c. fourth to fifth century CE) is the best composed and organized text of the *Dharma-shastra* tradition, with its superior vocabulary and level of sophistication. It has detailed laws on written contracts and witnesses, akin to Talmudic discussion. The law of Yajnavalkya is actually used. Yajnavalkya Smriti is more liberal than Manu Smriti, especially on matters such as women's right of inheritance and right to hold property.

(3) The Narada Smriti (c. fifth to sixth century CE), a juridical text par excellence, represents the only *Dharmashastra* text which deals solely with juridical matters and forensic law, both substantive and procedural without any reference to religious matters. In the matter of inheritance, Narada Smriti provides for an equal share in property for the mother along with her sons after the death of her husband.

Secondary Works

The *Dharmasutras* and *Dharmashastras* attracted secondary commentaries, which interpret and explain the text. For example, the Manusmriti has eight major commentaries required for an in-depth study roughly corresponding to the differences between the commentaries of Rashi, Tosfot, Rosh, and Maharasha on the Talmud. Another category of secondary literature are the digests, which attempt to reconcile, bridge, or suggest a compromised guideline to the numerous disagreements in the primary texts; however, the digests, in themselves, disagreed with each other even on basic principles. The digests are generally arranged by topic and would correspond to the halakhic texts of a similar nature to the Sefer Mitzvot Gadol, Shulkhan Arukh, and Levush.

There are also digests of specific topics such as inheritance, adoption, and judicial process, just as there are in Jewish law.

A few notable historic digests on *Dharmashastras* were written by women, but their views were not widely adopted by male legal scholars. The works of the female scholar Lakshmidēvi were also published with the nom de plume *Balambhatta* and are now considered classics in legal theories on inheritance and property rights.

The study of *Dharmasutras* is dependent on the *Mimamsa* school of Hindu philosophy for textual hermeneutics, theories on language and interpretation of *dharma*. And the *Nyaya* school offers discussions on the theories of logic and reason and contributes to the development of and disagreements between the *Dharmashastra* texts.

Sva-dharma

Sva-dharma means literally own *dharma* or own duty and particular responsibilities. To perform work according to one's own inner law or nature; thus, it is duty according to one's caste, one's age group within the caste, and one's stage of life. Every person has unique duties and responsibilities and their own *dharma* or it is unique to that person because everyone has different capacities for righteousness. One's birth determines

this capacity, which is a result of karma, actions in a previous life.

Today *sva-dharma* can be more liberally interpreted according to one's personal understanding of the position reached in life and the best course to take in the future to achieve the final goal.

The basic structure of the *Bhagavad Gita* is the view that taking part in a war is perfectly acceptable as long as it can be interpreted as one's *sva-dharma*. Brahmanic doctrine says one must follow one's *sva-dharma* at all times, even if it means breaking the rules of *sadharana dharma*, the general laws for all; therefore, the soldier must fight.

Jewish texts about personal paths, whether Hasidic or from Martin Buber are in the tradition of *sva-dharma*. Modern Jewish questions about the relationship of autonomy, contemporary values, and the fixed tradition can be formulated as the tension of *dharma* and *sva-dharma*.

As Modern Law

Hindu law has always functioned within the broader context of Indian law, which was local, variegated, and based on different regions and kingdoms. *Dharmashastra* became influential in modern colonial India history in a Western codified form. The Manu-smriti was codified as colonial Hindu law in ways that it had not been in the past, treating the text as law without concern for multiple manuscripts, commentaries, digests, and local custom.

Ludo Rocher, a scholar of the *Dharma-shastra* states that Hindu tradition does not express law in the sense of *jus* nor of *lex*. The term "Hindu law" is a colonial construction that emerged when the colonial rule arrived in South Asia and when, in 1772, it was decided by British colonial officials in consultation with Mughal rulers, that that Hindus of India would be ruled under their Hindu law and Muslims of India would be ruled under Shaaria-Muslim law. Hindu law, however, was neither mentioned, nor in use, nor codified, during the six hundred years of Islamic rule of India. An attempt was then made to find any old surviving Sanskrit text that mentioned elements of law and this is how Western editors and translators arrived at the equation that *dharma shastra* equals law book and legal code.

However, later scholars consider the *dharma* texts of Hinduism as mostly concerned with moral and religious norms which have some but not

a very close relationship to legal practice.^[2] In the words of Donald R. Davis, leading scholar of the Hindu legal tradition, “the legal cosmology presupposed in classical Hindu law has been lost and replaced” in modern Hindu law “with a very different” modern legal cosmology.^[3]

After the independence of India from the colonial rule of Britain in 1947, India adopted a new constitution in 1950. Most of the legal code from the colonial era continued as the law of the new nation. For example, Article 44 of the 1950 Indian Constitution mandates a uniform civil code, eliminating most, but not all, religion-based civil laws including Hindu law, Christian law, and Muslim law throughout the territory of India. However, Hindu family law has since been amended to be independent of ancient religious texts.

SANSKARA (RITE OF PASSAGE)

Sanskaras are the diverse Hindu rites of passage governing the time from conception to cremation, signifying milestones in an individual’s journey of life. Hindu rites of passage are not mere ceremonies; rather, they are like *mizvot* in Judaism and serve as means to connect to the divine and purify the soul at critical junctions in life’s journey. *Sanskara*, in modern usage, is sometimes used to mean cultural, social or religious heritage, or proper path. For many, the word is used the way Jews may use Judaism, Yiddishkeit, or mensch, as a general phrase for the proper way of life or entire religion.^[4]

The word *sanskara* means mental impression, for the ceremonies help create a favorable mentality for stepping positively from one phase of life into the next. The neglect of any ritual might render a member fallen from their status. Based on the Hindu theory of karma, *sanskaras* are dispositions, character or behavioral traits, that exist as default from birth or are prepared and perfected by a person over their lifetime; they exist as imprints on the subconscious. These perfected or default imprints of *karma* within a person, influences that person’s nature, responses, and states of mind. For most contemporary Hindus, these rites are given symbolic and allegorical meaning about the proper way to live a modern life, the same way Jewish books do for Jewish rites and *mizvot*.

For the more scholastic *Nyaya* thinkers, rites of passage are psychological and not metaphysical. The acts trigger impressions or

dispositions in the psyche of an individual, and these in turn influence how the individual acts, perceives the self, and the way the individual responds to or accepts the karmic circumstances and the future. *Samsara* improves preexisting vices along with induction of positive virtues in life.

The list of *sanskaras* in Hinduism includes external rituals such as those marking a baby's birth as well as inner rites of resolutions and ethics, such as compassion toward all living beings and a positive attitude.

Marriage

Marriage (*Vivaha*) is perhaps the most important rite of passage that a Hindu observes, as the transition from the first stage of life, devoted to education and learning, to the second stage of life, devoted to building a household and raising children, occurs. The ceremony has numerous uncanny similarities to a Jewish ceremony in that both are celebrations of rejoicing, commitment to each other, and both are based on ancient ideas of the transference of the bride to the domain of the groom; neither faith is sacramental in the way a Christian wedding is about God. Both the Hindu and Jewish faith emphasize the joy and responsibility of the couple.

The Hindu marriage ceremony is primarily based on the marriage of *Surya*, the daughter of Savita (the Sun) to *Soma*, as described in the *Rig Veda*. Savita gives the bride away to the groom in a splendid ceremony described in *Grihya* sutras, in which many verses are taken directly from *Rig Veda*. During the various rituals, the couple commits to remain faithful to each other and repeat the pledge in front of the Fire God, the *Agni*, and all the witnesses. Then, they walk seven steps together with seven marriage vows to each other. The seven steps are:

With the first step, we will provide for and support each other.

With the second step, we will develop mental, physical and spiritual strength.

With the third step, we will share the worldly possessions.

With the fourth step, we will acquire knowledge, happiness and peace.

With the fifth step, we will raise strong and virtuous children.

With the sixth step, we will enjoy the fruits of all seasons.

With the seventh step, we will always remain friends and cherish each other.

The Jewish *chuppah* is similar to the *mandap*, the Hindu wedding canopy. In both traditions, the number seven carries symbolic meaning. In a

Hindu wedding, the bride and groom circle a fire seven times; in traditional Ashkenaz Jewish ceremonies, the bride circles the groom seven times. The Seven Blessings (*Sheva Brachot*) and Seven Steps (*Saptapadi*) are key parts of each service. Finally, at the conclusion of the traditional wedding ceremony, the Jewish groom breaks a glass and the Hindu bride steps on a clay pot.

Jewish readers should note the similarities in walking around seven times, the fasting on the day of the wedding, the need for a canopy into which the bride is brought, the separation before the wedding, and the acceptance of the traditional wedding responsibilities. In both ceremonies, there are references to the joy of love, with the Jewish service invoking the Garden of Eden and the festivities of wedding. The Hindu wedding also refers to it as joy and the fulfillment of desire (*kama*) in life.

At Hindu weddings, like at many others, food is a very important part of the whole experience. The couple getting married often have a fast on the morning of their wedding, which is only partly broken by some sweet milk. After all are seated, the ceremony starts with prayers to bless the occasion and make the marriage ceremony free of obstacles. It is followed by the blessings of elders and forefathers.

Today, almost every Hindu wedding has adopted the custom of a *baraat* ceremony of the groom dressed as a king riding to the canopy on a horse. It is fun and gives people a chance to relax and feel part of the festivities. The entire wedding party follows: dancing, clapping, and laughing. The bride is brought to the bridal canopy, *mandap*, typically by her maternal uncle, along with bridesmaids, and groomsmen. An auspicious cloth, separates bride and groom as a symbol of their separate existence prior to the marriage. After the mantras are recited, the bride and groom garland each other, indicating their mutual approval to proceed with the ceremony. The *pandit* explains to them the objectives of the Hindu life and then they propose to marry each other.

The groom then adorns the bride's neck with the *Mangalsutra*, a necklace, and applies *kumkum* on the bride's forehead. The bride applies *chandan tilak* on the groom's forehead. With the wedding ring exchange, they commit to support each other, in good times and in bad times, in happiness and in sorrow, with unending love. The groom's sister or mother as a symbol of their permanent bond joins them together in a marriage knot.

The couple lights the *Agni*, the holy fire that symbolizes light, power, and knowledge, and acts as a witness to the ceremony. The bride and groom repeat the sacred pledge of marriage and request *Agni* to be the messenger for their prayers to various gods for children, wealth, and prosperity. They circle the sacred fire four times, starting their transition into married life. As they circle the fire, the groom poetically describes to the bride their complementary relationship.

HINDU ETHICS

In the nineteenth century, Protestant thinkers condemned Judaism for a lack of ethics. Kant defined ethics as based on autonomy and on moral will. He also thought Judaism is a national-political entity rather than a religion since it fails to satisfy the essential criteria of religion in that it fails to inculcate the inner appropriation of morals and demands only external obedience to statutes and laws. Later theologians, including Adolf von Harnack, painted the Pharisees as childish in ethics and legally casuistic, in which Jewish ethics are bound up in a petrified ritual observance and moral holiness is completely lost. During the same era, these same German Protestants painted Hinduism as immoral, focused on external obedience, and devoid of ethics. Max Weber, the famous sociologist, saw no rational ethics in Hinduism and the sociologist Edvard Westermarck wrote that Hindus are immoral because they are ritualistic.

What should be obvious to the twenty-first-century reader is the commonality of Judaism and Hinduism in their sense of ritual duty and the common prejudicial attitudes of late nineteenth-century Protestant scholarship toward both of them. Yet, I find Hindu works on religion siding against Judaism's ritualism and I find Jews parroting the critiques of Hinduism as not ethical.^[5]

Human Goals

In Hinduism, there are four legitimate human pursuits: (1) *dharma* (ethical or right behavior); (2) *artha* (economic gain and political power); (3) *kama* (pleasure and leisure activities, including sexuality); (4) *moksha* (liberation).

Judaism's official focus is on the first category of *dharma* as *mitzvah*, *halakhah*, and *Torah*. The second category of the political and economic theory and practice did not generate their own books in Judaism and Judaism has no significant books providing guidance to rulers and princes of applied politics; however, Jewish guides to right behavior as *dharma* in the legal realms of business are abundant. The third category of pleasure, leisure, and sexuality is noticeably lacking in Judaism, which does not have anything resembling the *Kama Sutra* for sexuality, nor does it have books on the aesthetic pleasures of art and nature. Finally, both religions have liberation and the afterlife, but many in modern Judaism have pushed much of its rich tradition of liberation by intimating that the world should come aside for this-worldly modernity.

The first demand, the following of *dharma*, cannot be superseded by the other four virtues. *The Code of Manu* points out, even if your life stage encourages economic gain (for example, as a householder), unethical means are never condoned. Wealth and pleasure gained outside of virtue or righteousness must be discarded (Code of Manu IV.176). In addition, liberation does not override the others but is instead, the result of the well lived life.

Many in the West misrepresent the Hindu religion as otherworldly and without ethics. For example, Abba Hillel Silver's *Where Judaism Differed*, paints Hinduism as passive resignation compared to the activity of Jewish ethics; however, in a correct portrayal of Hinduism, *moksha* is the culmination of one's fulfillment of *dharma* so that even the transcendent state of liberation is interconnected with right earthly living. In Hinduism, pleasure is enjoyed within the limits of righteousness (*Bhagavad Gita* 7:11).

Similar to Judaism, *dharma* works mainly with casuistry, not principles. On the individual level, both religions focus on character and virtue. Both maintain the need for knowledge of correct action and both the Hindu *Mimamsa-Nyaya* texts and Jewish thinkers such as Maimonides seek to cultivate the innate characteristics of the individual and the impulse in the self to do good. Later, Hindu theistic texts will place a divine gifted faculty, a grace, in the human soul to do good. However, many groups in modern Judaism have sought to conform to the Kantian view of deontological duty. They have even made Jewish ethics or *halakhah* into Kantian abstraction.

Dharma and Universal Ethics

The Code of Manu, and then later in the epics, especially the Mahabharata, contain lists of universal ethical behaviors expected of all humans regardless of station in life or class. *Sadharana dharma* or *samanya dharma*: (1) Steadfastness; (2) forgiveness; (3) application; (4) not acquiring things; (5) cleanliness; (6) control of sensuous appetites; (7) wisdom; (8) learning; (9) veracity; and (10) restraint of anger. In addition to these ten, there is the highly regarded ethics of non-violence (*ahimsa*) and seeking the good of all creatures. Alternately, the five cardinal principles of Hindu ethics are: purity, self-control, detachment, truth, and non-violence.

Does this compare to Judaism? In Judaism, the most cited three ethical virtues are the juridical moral virtues of mercy, law, and justice, where many works list only mercy and justice. Maimonides in his *Guide of the Perplexed* shows the importance of mediating mercy and judgment into justice, while his *Mishnah Torah* lists six qualities: mercy, judgment, justice, compassion, truth, and peace. The noticeable difference is the role of judgment in Judaism and Hinduism's virtue of nonviolence and renouncing material things.

The Hindu list is closer to the more pious list by the Mishnaic sage, R. Pinchas ben Yair: "Torah leads to Watchfulness; Watchfulness leads to Zeal; Zeal leads to Cleanliness; Cleanliness leads to Separation; Separation leads to Purity; Purity leads to Saintliness; Saintliness leads to Humility; Humility leads to Fear of Sin; Fear of Sin leads to Holiness; Holiness leads to the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit leads to the Revival of the Dead" (Avodah Zara 20b). This pious list that culminates in Holy Spirit or Enlightenment was used by the kabbalist Rabbi Moses Hayyim Luzzatto in the eighteenth century to create a path of perfection that would be similar to many within Hinduism.^[6]

Another closer pious statement, Rabbi Elazar HaKappar said: "Jealousy, lust and the [pursuit of] honor remove a person from the world" (Avot 4:28). In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna says that lust, anger and greed ruin men and they must shun them (*Bhagavad Gita* XVI.21). In the Mahabharata, it is noted that these virtues are greater, at least in an axiological sense, the status of a Brahmin in "truth, charity, fortitude, good conduct, austerity, and compassion—he in whom these are observed is a *brahmana* (Mbh.

III.CLXXX.2.25). The rhetoric is similar to the Talmudic sages who said (*Horayot* 3:8) a bastard who is a scholar (*talmid hakham*) takes precedence over a High Priest who is an ignoramus (*am ha'aretz*). In both cases, heredity priesthood is downplayed to ethics or in the Jewish case, study.

Hinduism also has its own large share of epigrams in praise of study and teachers combined with moral exhortation. "Speak the truth. Be righteous. Do not neglect scriptural study. After having made a valuable gift to the teacher, do not sever family ties." The passage continues: "Treat your mother like a god. Treat your father like a god. Treat your teacher like a god. Treat your guest like a god." (*Taittiriya Up* 1:11). The emphasis of learning, the connection of parents and teachers, and righteousness places Hinduism so close to Judaism. Maimonides wrote: "Just as a person is commanded to honor his father and hold him in awe, so, too, is he obligated to honor his teacher and hold him in awe. Indeed, [the measure of honor and awe] due one's teacher exceeds that due one's father. His father brings him into the life of this world, while his teacher, who teaches him wisdom, brings him into the life of the world to come" (*Hilkhhot Talmud Torah* 5:1).

According to Hindu culture and religion, children below the age of twelve are exempted from punishment for all wrong doings, whether done willfully or ignorantly. Similarly, within Judaism, children are not culpable until they reach puberty, twelve for girls and thirteen for boys. Once again, there is no need to see any influence; rather, both have an embodied view of religious responsibility.

Golden Rule

The Golden Rule is one of the universal rational principles of religion. The Hindu version is "This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you" (*Mahabharata* 5:1517). Elsewhere we find an alternate version: "One should not behave towards others in a way which is disagreeable to oneself. This is the essence of morality. All other activities are due to selfish desire" (*Mahabharata*, 113.8). A version found in a legal

text reads “Wound not others, do no one injury by thought or deed, utter no word to pain thy fellow creatures” (Code of Manu).

Judaism has similar ideas found in both the Torah: “thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Lev. 19:18). We also see it by Hillel in the Talmud: “What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow man. This is the law: all the rest is commentary” (Talmud, Shabbat 31a).

Hatya or *Vadha* denotes killing a human being, considered the most heinous of all the mortal sins mentioned in the Hindu *shastras*. According to Hindu traditions, no human being has any right to take away another life.

Theft, or depriving someone of his or her property and wealth, whether in small quantity or large, either directly or clandestinely, is also considered one of the grave sins in Hindu scriptures. Incest, or having sex with one’s own family, that is, with the father or mother or brother or sister is considered a sin. All of these sins of killing, theft, and incest are basics of biblical ethics.

General Ethos of Purification, Karma, and Penance

Characteristic of Hindu ethics is the need for the purification of the mind (*cittashuddhi*): when life station and duties become internalized, the individual is able to live the Hindu ideal of detachment (*vairagya*) in which one is not emotionally or otherwise attached to the outcome of one’s actions but is able to perform them without care for results. For example, Krishna’s advice to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita* is that Arjuna should perform his duty without attachment to the end result.

The rabbis have a similar sentiment in the statement from Antigonus of Socho who used to say: “Be not like servants who minister unto their master for the sake of receiving a reward, but be like servants who serve their master not upon the condition of receiving a reward; and let the fear of Heaven be upon you” (*Avot* 1:3). This message of detachment is of the utmost value in the development of Hindu ethics but is generally left for pietists and mystics within Judaism.

Dharma is related to the concept of *karma*. One who neglects the *dharma* injures society and also brings misfortune to his or her own existence. Misfortune or negative karma may affect the outcome of the individual’s current life, next life, or both, depending on the nature of the

action. This gave rise to the concept of doing penance for one's misdeeds to atone for the karma incurred for a particular crime or sin. Similar to Judaism, in Hinduism the repentant should feel for the mistake committed and the victims, then he should initiate acts to remove sins.

Another similarity is the idea that "the Vedas do not cleanse a man who pays no heed to good conduct" which is similar to the rabbinic idea that "Transgressions between a person and their fellow, Yom Kippur doesn't atone until they make their fellow accept them and their teshuvah" (M. Yoma 8:9).

Charity

Dana, or charity, is a basic Hindu practice of the virtue of generosity or giving. As part of daily life and more so on auspicious days, Hindus give charity to the poor and needy. *Dana* is a basic form of redemption from sin; it can take the form of giving to an individual in distress or philanthropic public projects that empower and help many such as building a rest house, school, drinking water or irrigation well, planting trees, and building care facilities among others.

Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (5.2.3), states that three characteristics of a good, developed person are self-restraint (*damah*), compassion or love for all sentient life (*daya*), and charity (*dana*). The *Bhagavad Gita* describes the right and wrong forms of *dana* in verses 17.20 through 17.22.

Showing Protestant bias, Albert Schweitzer declared that the *Bhagavad Gita* had no moral action and therefore Hinduism is immoral. From an opposing perspective, Rudolph Otto praised the *Gita* as praiseworthy in that it is similar to Lutheranism, which offers salvation entirely through faith and the grace of God without any value to works. Both perspectives, however, are nonsense in that the *Gita* is all about dharmic action, especially charity.

The Mahabharata states that a person must first acquire wealth by honest means, then embark on charity; be hospitable to those who come to him; never inflict pain on any living being; and share a portion with others whatever he consumes (chapter 91) and elsewhere recommends public projects as a form of *dana* (chapter 58).

Thirukkural, sometimes called the *Tamil Veda*, written by Thiruvalluvar (first century BCE) is divided into three sections arranged in the canonical

division of *dharma*, *artha*, and *kama*. The *Thirukkural*, suggests charity is necessary for a virtuous life and happiness: “Giving to the poor is true charity, all other giving expects some return”; “Great, indeed, is the power to endure hunger. Greater still is the power to relieve other’s hunger”; “Giving alms is a great reward in itself to one who gives” (Book I chapter 23). [\[7\]](#)

Offering hospitality is fundamental to the Hindu culture. Providing food and shelter to a needy stranger was a traditional duty of the householder. The unexpected guest is to be treated as God. There are many stories regarding the benefits of offering a suitable reception and the sins that accrue from neglecting one’s guests. Tradition teaches that, no matter how poor one is, one should always offer three items: sweet words, a sitting place, and refreshments (at the very least, a glass of water). The flower garland is offered to special guests and dignitaries, as a symbol of loving exchange.

“Even an enemy must be offered appropriate hospitality if he comes to your home. A tree does not deny its shade even to the one who comes to cut it down” (Mahabharata 12.374). In the *Bhagavata Purana*, there is a well known story of hospitality reminiscent of the midrashic embellishments of the Abraham story.

Rantideva never endeavored to earn anything. He would enjoy whatever he got by the arrangement of providence, but when guests came he would give them everything. Thus he underwent considerable suffering, along with the members of his family shivered for want of food and water, yet Rantideva always remained sober. Once, after fasting for forty-eight days, in the morning Rantideva received some water and some foodstuffs made with milk and ghee, but when he and his family were about to eat, a brahmana guest arrived. Because Rantideva perceived the presence of the Supreme Godhead everywhere, and in every living entity, he received the guest with faith and respect and gave him a share of the food. The brahmana guest ate his share and then went away. Thereafter, having divided the remaining food with his relatives, Rantideva was just about to eat his own share when a sudra guest arrived. Seeing the sudra in relationship with the Supreme

Personality of Godhead, King Rantideva gave him also a share of the food. When the sudra went away, another guest arrived, surrounded by dogs, and said, “O King, I and my company of dogs are very hungry. Please give us something to eat.” With great respect, King Rantideva offered the balance of the food to the dogs and the master of the dogs, who had come as guests. The King offered them all respects and obeisances.

Thereafter, only the drinking water remained, and there was only enough to satisfy one person, but when the King was just about to drink it, a candala appeared and said, “O King, although I am lowborn, kindly give me some drinking water.”

Suddenly, out of thin air, great demigods (*devas*), who can satisfy all materially ambitious men by giving them the rewards they desire, then manifested their own identities before King Rantideva, for it was they who had presented themselves as the brahmana, sudra, candala and so on. (9.21.3–10)

The great demigods had tested the king for his level of tolerance and compassion and the great king succeeded and thus received their blessings.

In Judaism, showing hospitality (*hakhnasat orchim*) to guests is considered a *mitzvah* and part of loving kindness. When one knows of strangers who are hungry or need a place to relax, it becomes a legal obligation. The first time hospitality is displayed in the Torah is when Abraham invites the three wanderers from Mamre to relax while he brings them water and food. They then reveal themselves as angels or a theophany greeting God in hospitality (Gen. 18:1–5) to which the Talmud adds: “Welcoming guests is greater than receiving the face of the *Shekhinah*” (*Shabbat 127b*) Later, when Abraham sends his servant to find a wife for his son Isaac, Rebecca graciously watered the traveler’s thirsty horses.

Medicine and Modern Questions

How does Hinduism relate to modern ethical questions? Answer: The same way Judaism creates statements on modern issues such as medical ethics. Modern Jewish medical ethics do not generally focus on the Jewish pre-modern kabbalistic ideas, so too modern Hindus do not look to the

otherworldly traditions.^[8]

Indian religions have strong acceptance and integration with the medical arts and the importance of seeking treatment as shown in their own *ayurvedic* medicine tradition and the yogic tradition. Therefore, unlike Judaism, which lacks its own medical system, even if Maimonides and many others combined religion and medicine, Hinduism has medicine as part of its tradition. Hindu medical ethics are based in wellness and are patient oriented, similar to yoga. The Hindu equivalent of the Hippocratic Oath specifies dedication, intentionality, and privacy. “You must not betray your patients, even at the cost of your life” which continues “when you go to the home of a patient you should direct your words, mind, intellect and senses nowhere but to your patient and his treatment. . . . Nothing that happens in the house of the sick must be told outside” (Caraka Samhita III.8.7).

Generally speaking, the Hindu ethic for life is to preserve it. The medical treatises of Hindu antiquity, including the *Ayurvedic* and yoga literature, concentrated on how to improve and preserve human health and life, suffering is to be averted (Yoga Sutra II.16). S. Cromwell Crawford, a Hindu/Jain Professor of medical ethics at the University of Hawaii, notes that the Hindu ethic behind life and death is based on the understanding that “living is more than being alive” and so medical efforts to preserve bodily existence are always weighed against the spiritual.

In determining death in Hinduism, the cessation of breathing and cardiac activity cannot be the sole criteria for death in India because they can be induced by yoga. Hence, in India, brain stem death would be the most acceptable criteria or even the possible cessation of body heat. Judaism is the exact opposite, treating breathing and cardiac activity as the basic criteria for death, while considering brain stem death as debatable.

Crawford points out that Hindu ethics may be said to follow three principles: (1) Principle of beneficence: what is beneficial for the patient is considered ethically good; (2) Principle of obligation: there is within the Hindu social understanding a sense of obligation to preserve the existing society as well as making provision for the welfare of future generations; and (3) Hindu ethics of medicine endeavor to preserve life when viable.^[9]

FOOD

Which religion is most associated with food? Jews are convinced that Judaism is the most concerned with food, but Hinduism places such a great emphasis on the role of food that A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder of the Hare Krishna Movement, called it “the kitchen religion.” No religious or public function is complete without an offering of food to the gods and the distribution of food. Hinduism has extensive rules about food and the kitchen as well as extensive eating rituals.

Hindu teachings regard food as divine (*Annam Brahma*). There are many levels to this idea, one of which is that food should not be wasted, similar to the Jewish idea of *Bal Tashhit*, “thou shalt not destroy” (Deut. 20:19). The Hindu version makes life directly dependent on food: “From food are produced all creatures which dwell on earth. Then they live by food, and in the end they return to food” (*Taittiriya Upanishad*). The *Dharmashastras* treat food as divine, stating that when a person sees food, he should respect it as God and he should fold his hands, bow to it, and say a prayer of gratitude. In performing this act, he should honor it, never speak ill of it, and never find fault in it.

Vegetarianism and Diet

Vegetarianism is traditional in India. The practice itself is varied in different parts of India, much like the observance of kashrut in different parts of Israel. In Jerusalem, not only is food kosher, but it is also under a better rabbinical kosher certification. The majority of Israel, however, keeps traditional dietary practices, even if not so strictly observed. There are cities in Israel that are secular and ignore it entirely and the same is true of India. Most Hindus who live in Varanasi or Rishikesh are vegetarian; however, in the modern and more secular parts of the country, there is quite a bit of meat eating.

Fast food chains are becoming increasingly popular in India; however, just as most Israelis avoid pork even if they do not keep kosher, in India, even those who eat meat tend to avoid beef. The result is that the most significant restaurant chain is Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC), as there is a stronger comfort level in eating chicken. McDonald’s, on the other hand, is less prestigious. As such, in India, the chain has modified its menu; instead of serving beef burgers, it serves veggie burgers, chicken burgers, and burgers

made from cheese. Some people that I met, regularly ate eggs or chicken and yet, would be extra careful to eat a strictly vegetarian diet during the festival of Navaratri. Domino's pizza, for example is strictly vegetarian during the festival.

On the university campus, where there were two ice cream vendors; one of them had a sign that his product was strictly vegetarian. The difference was that his ice cream bars did not use resinous glaze, an insect derivative, used to make candy decorations. I understood the issue as similar to Orthodox Jewish dietary rules. The kosher supervision of the Orthodox Union follows Rabbi Moses Feinstein, which allows resinous glaze since it has been reduced to a chemical form. Several strictly kosher certifications, on the other hand, do not.

There are, of course, exceptions to the vegetarianism. In Kashmir, *Brahmans* eat meat (though not beef) and to a lesser extent, in Orissa, Bengal, and Maharashtra, diets may include eggs, fish, chicken, and even lamb and goat. Beef has traditionally been a part of the Dalit (formerly called untouchables) diet and part of their identity; yet, many Indian states have banned beef-eating in deference to Hindu practice. Dalit activists object to the overpowering ruling upper castes which do not allow them to keep their beef eating culture. Many Hindu groups avoid onions, garlic, and all other members of the *Allium* genus including shallots, chives, and leeks.

Food as a Virtue

The origins of the Hindu diet go back to older texts. The *Hathayoga Pradipika* (Verses 1.59–61) suggests that the regimen of a yogi avoids foods with excessive amounts of sour, salt, bitterness, oil, spice burn, unripe vegetables, fermented foods, or alcohol. Another ancient text, *Thirukkural* or *Tamil Vedas* (400 CE), written in the south Indian Tamil language, preaches that a moderate diet is a part of a virtuous lifestyle and criticizes non-vegetarianism.

Vaishnava Hindus, who follow the *Samkhya* natural philosophy, divide food into three categories or qualities called *gunas*. The three categories are: *Sattva*, *Rajas*, and *Tamas*. *Rajas* are characterized as agitated, passionate, moving, emotional and *Tamas* as destructive, spoiled, ignorant, stale, inert, unnatural, weak, unclean. In contrast, *sattvic* food is described

as pure, essence, nature, vital, energy, clean, conscious, strong, courage, true, honest, wise, rudiment of life. Crediting the food one eats to a state of mind, the *Bhagavad Gita* (17.8–10) states that one who is in the *sattva* state of mind prefers foods that are life-giving, purifying to one's existence, and that gives strength, health, happiness and satisfaction (6:16). Moderation is considered a key practice in *sattvic* lifestyle along with yoga, which abates over-eating.

When my class in India read Genesis, they naturally wanted to discuss the verse, "Every moving thing that lives shall be for food for you; as the green herb have I given you all." (*Bhagavad Gita* 9:3) The students asserted that the verse provided proof that ideally, religion teaches vegetarianism. The following class, I brought in passages from Rabbi Joseph Albo (fifteenth century, Spain) who explains that the consumption and slaughter of animals leads to the development of negative traits in man. For Albo, as man consumes meat, he becomes transformed into a merciless killer, with an increasingly weaker connection to his soul (*Sefer ha-Ikkarim* 3:15).

Parsadam and Naivedhya

"The saintly persons get relief from all kinds of sins by partaking the food that has been first offered to gods as sacrifice. But those who prepare food for their selfish ends eat but only sins." (*Bhagavad Gita* 3:13) There are two ways to offer food to God: the *naivedhya* and *parsadam*. *Naivedyam* means food offered to a Hindu deity as part of a worship ritual, before eating it. *Prasad* is the return of God's blessing by eating the food offered in a temple before a deity. At home, there is only *naivedhya*, a blessing of the food before eating. Some strict Gaudiya Vaishnavas will eat only meals first offered to Krishna in *puja*.

In Hinduism, no salt is offered to a deity, whereas when serving food to people, salt is served first. Contrastingly, in the Bible there is no sacrifice to God without salt (Lev. 2:13).

Hindu Food Prayers

According to the code of Manu, food that is worshipped, gives strength, therefore, one should eat his food with concentrated mind, after performing an ablution; and after he has eaten, one should cleanse himself with water. In theory, the pious sprinkle water before eating around the food, accompanied by mantras or prayers as an act of purification to make it worthy for the gods. In addition, the pious make an offering of the food to five vital breaths (*pranas*), and then to *Brahman* seated in the heart. Some Hindus offer food to their personal gods or divinities before eating instead of the five vital breaths, placing five morsels of food on the side of the plate, thereby acknowledging the debt owed to the divine forces for their benign grace and protection.

During my time at the university, I ate lunch daily in the faculty guesthouse and observed how people ate, washed their hands before and after, and noticed who prayed with short prayers and who prayed with long devotions. Many of the faculty members, government officials, and scholars ate without washing or prayer or with a hasty sprinkling and prayer. There was, however, a visiting post-doctorate who was the most devout in the group. He performed hand washings and water sprinkling as well as praying both before and after he ate.

The following lines from the *Bhagavad Gita* (4:24) are usually recited as one of the traditional blessings before a meal:

The dedication is the Supreme Being, the oblation is the Supreme Being, the one who offers is the Supreme Being, the sacrificial fire is the Supreme Being, the attainment of the one who performs the act of offering and sees the Supreme Being in all is the Supreme Being.

Hindu blessings before meals center on the divinity of all things. In contrast, the Jewish versions are theistic and thankful for God creating the food: "Blessed are you who created the bread of the earth." The Jewish version focuses on the gifts of the divine rather than on the fullness of the divine; food is created, not manifest. According to the *Zohar*, spiritual eating can even join on to the upper heavenly light.

Phillipe Bornet, an academic scholar of Hindu and Jewish comparisons,

has shown the deep commonalities in hospitality and table rules between the two faiths. Both rabbinic and Brahmin domestic practices model after the home meal after a temple service creating a symbolic space to frame the ordinary meal. And both are simultaneously concerned with inviting guests to the meal and the purity of the meal.^[10]

Water Ritual

An important part of ritual purification in Hinduism is the bathing of the entire body, particularly in rivers considered holy, such as the Ganges. *Achamana* is the specific act of purifying one's body by thrice sipping water and touching several parts of the body while facing East and repeating the names of the Lord. It is performed before almost all Brahmin prayers, rituals, and before eating. A small quantity of water is taken in that palm and it is sipped thrice so that the water drunk may reach the region of the heart. There are many rules to the order of touching various fingers and limbs.

Various daily acts require bathing or *achamanam*. These occasions include: immediately after waking up in the morning, after urination and other forms of excretion, before and after a meal, after sexual activity, and upon association or contact with ritually impure substances such as blood, semen, human hair, fire, rodents, and refuse. The enumerated list is very similar to the list in Talmudic law; however, forms not in Jewish law are handwashing before and after giving or accepting alms or shedding tears.

Only a limited percentage of contemporary Hindus follow the ritual Orthodoxy. In the sort of notice common in Jewish Orthodox publications, the BAPS Hindu organization states on their website: "It is very unfortunate now to see people eating without the conventions of washing their hands. Maybe the bigger meals are taken after washing hands, but small meals and snacks are normally consumed without cleaning the hands."^[11]

HINDU WOMEN: PRIESTS AND MENSTRUATION

Hindu texts present diverse and conflicting views on the position of women in society, ranging from feminine empowerment and leadership as the highest goddess to a more subservient view as a woman's role as an obedient daughter, housewife, and mother.

The *Devi Sukta* hymn of *Rigveda*, declares feminine energy as the essence of the universe, the one that creates all matter and consciousness, the eternal and infinite. The Upanishads mention women engaged in the philosophical debates. Female characters appear in plays and epic poems. The Mahabharata, for example, states that no man, even in anger, should ever do anything that is disagreeable to his wife as happiness, joy, virtue, and everything depends on the wife. In this text, the wife is the sacred soil from which the husband is born again (Mahabharata Book, 1.74.50–51). Similarly, the Talmud states that blessing is not found in a home except through the wife (Baba Metzia 59). Still, however, the Mahabharata contains several chapters dedicated to the discussion about duties toward her husband.

In Hinduism, there are deep customary restrictions placed on women seen as the unchanging tradition. As in the debates about inclusion of women within modern Orthodox Judaism, the discussion quickly turns to the canonical status of those works with restrictions. For example, Tryambakayajvan of Thanjavur published *Stridharmapaddhati* (sometimes referred to *A Guide for a Dharmic Woman*) in the eighteenth century, which presented the current customs and restrictions placed on women. Behind that eighteenth-century work are the ancient laws in the Manusmriti code of Hindu law, yet it also contains much customary and local stringency. Scholars have also questioned the authenticity and corruption of the Manusmriti over time, with many conflicting manuscripts containing different opinions. [\[12\]](#)

Based on my familiarity with the struggles and attainments of modern Orthodox Jewish women in the United States, I took special interest in the issues of similar concern such as women priests, menstruation restrictions, and hair covering.

Priests

There is a Sanskrit college for girls in Varanasi, founded in 1971, to give

women access to sacred texts that were historically limited to men. The majority of the women are from the upper Brahmin class.^[13] In the last decade, however, they have been giving full training to the Hindu Brahmin Temple officiating clergy, which parallels recent developments in the Jewish modern Orthodox community to produce women clergy. Their training in classic texts spans for ten years, mirroring the longevity of their male counterparts' studies. They enter the program of study around the ages of nine to eleven and finish a decade later with a BA or MA in Sanskrit studies. They get up at 4:00 a.m. and keep the full monastic Brahmin life of prayer, meditation, sacrifice, and training in temple ritual and rites of passage as well as a full secular studies curriculum.

These girls have little or no contact with the outside world: no radio, no TV, no movie night. The organizers of the program wanted to create a program as intense as the best of the men's programs. The female students follow all the strict Brahmin Orthodox rules and they live a strictly Orthodoxy life. To add to this, they also study archery, swords, daggers, javelin, and horse riding, similar to the martial arts monks. They also learn self-defense skills that include the Indian martial arts.

In the last decade, the school and its graduates have started to advocate for the women the adoption of traditionally male prayer rituals, especially the wearing of the sacred thread, which was traditionally a male ritual garment. The arguments around the issue are familiar ones to Jewish Orthodox ears: Can women keep their body clean? What of her childrearing role? Were there women in history who wore them? What did the original texts say?

A local newspaper invoked the authority of tradition by reminding the readers that for thousands of years, religious decree barred women from entering temples and chanting or listening to mantras. Predictably, conservative Brahmin leaders, especially the religious leaders of the main Temple in Varanasi, have written to teachers at the institute saying Hinduism does not permit women to wear the holy thread, recite shlokas, pronounce Om, and perform yoga. Moreover, they argue, in no way does it allow women to become priests. The debate carried over to newspaper articles and online postings. Yet, the lay president of the same local temple attended their graduation ceremonies as well as publicly defending them.

The reason given for the exclusion is women's supposed lack of knowledge of the scriptures: "Women destitute of strength and knowledge of the Vedas are as impure as falsehood itself" and that "there is no ritual for Vedic verses for women."^[14] The leadership of the college claims that in the correct understanding of Hindu *dharma* texts, it does not say that "women cannot recite mantras or lead *pujas*." For them, the claim that women cannot recite and listen to Vedas was retrograded back into the ancient texts. Professor Somnath Tripathi, who conducts the examinations at the women's college, rejects the belief that only male Brahmins have the right to recite mantras. For him, the scriptures never specified an exclusion of women's leadership.

The institution boasted about the number of women scholars it produced, but they have only found positions in more modern suburbs of Hyderabad or perform *pujas* at non-temple community events and at home. These struggles parallel those of the female Orthodox clergy. They are uncanny in that they are similar and demonstrate the cross-cultural concern of contemporary issues.

Menstruation

In the Hindu faith, menstruating women are traditionally considered ritually impure. They are not allowed to enter the kitchen and temples, sleep in the day time, bathe, wear flowers, have sex, touch other males or females, or talk loudly. They may not mount a horse, ox, or elephant, nor may they drive a vehicle. Women themselves are seen as impure and polluted, and are often isolated, and unable to return to their family for the length of their period.^[15] Manusmriti gives the instruction that until a woman's menstruation has ceased to flow, her body is impure. Some say this is after the third day, while others say after the fifth, seventh, or even ninth day her body is impure.

Women are discouraged to do *puja* or to pray. They usually are not allowed to enter temples, and in some cases, are kept separately from those in the rest of the village. Cooking is prohibited for almost all Hindu women in India and Nepal during menstruation. After washing her head on the third day, a menstruating woman can enter the kitchen and start cooking. In

many regions, menstruating woman must sleep on a bare bed without a mattress or a bed sheet.

The law of Manu states that a *Brahman*, while eating, should not look at a menstruating woman. To protect others from perceived contamination, Hindu menstruating women must use separate utensils for eating and drinking. They must also wash their clothing themselves.

The biblical laws of Leviticus stated that uncleanness is connected to sacredness. The biblical regulations of Leviticus specify that a menstruating woman must separate for seven days (Lev. 15:19). Any object she sits on or lies upon during this period becomes a carrier of impurity (*tumah*). One who comes into contact with her during this period becomes ritually impure (Lev. 15:19–23). Current Hindu books on menstruation, written for a modern Hindu audience, inevitably quote Orthodox Jewish works as collaboration of Hinduism. I was surprised the first time I came across approving references in a work on Hindu law to Rabbi Shimon Eider's *Laws of Niddah*, a work written for American Orthodox women.

A further parallel, is that Ethiopian Jews, until their arrival in the state of Israel, used to build huts for menstruating women, but they have been discouraged by the current Israeli rabbis.

Popular Hindu practice connects the legal term for menstruation as impure with the term for bad omen items, which is inauspicious and in popular Hindu thinking, impure and inauspicious mean the same thing.

Even a modernist movement such as the Ramakrishna Centre justifies the separation of menstruation and worship in their works. "Females get very cross when I say they must not do Hanumanji's *puja* (ritual worship) during their period." Rather, one can recite repetition of the Hanuman mantra but without using the *puja* ingredients of camphor, and lamp. In the *bhakti* tradition, chanting of God's names is always effective since the emphasis is more on devotion than precise ritual. [\[16\]](#)

A similar process occurred within Ashkenazi Jewry in the exclusion of menstruating women from the synagogue service. The Talmud states, "words of Torah are not susceptible to *tumah* (ritual impurity)" (Ber. 22a). Maimonides says, "All who are *tameh* (ritually impure) and even *niddot* [. . .] may hold the scroll of the Torah and even read from it, because the words of Torah are not susceptible to ritual impurity" (Hilchot Sefer Torah 10:8).

Yet, the thirteenth-century Rabbi Eliezer, Ben Yoel HaLevi of Bonn wrote, “women practice separation and do not enter the synagogue at the time of their menstruation.” The official position of Ashkenazi Jewry was that “even though the essential law is that it is permissible, there is a stringent view that disagrees in the case of a niddah, but even then there is no objection on High Holydays” (Rabbi Moses Isserles, sixteenth century, Orach Hayim 88:1).

However, in the twenty-first century, the debate continues in that many ultra-Orthodox places still uphold the prohibition. As one rabbi explained: “That’s not the practice in the shul, not because it’s forbidden, but there’s a certain standard that we operate with so that people who come there know what to expect.”^[17]

Shakti

The onset of menstruation brings to a woman’s body an openness to *shakti*, life energy referred to as Ananku, that is considered harmful if it is not controlled. This power, when contained, creates an orderly, functional, and joyous world; when it is out of control, it can burn the house down. In southern India, menstruation is equivalent to the divine power in gods, goddesses, forces of nature, animals, warriors, and kings; thus, the power of *shakti* has to be controlled.

We find similar homilies in Hasidic Judaism. The *Kotzker Rebbe* explains that impurity occurs only when holiness departs. God is directly involved with every childbirth creating a very great level of holiness involving one of the most sublime divine powers. After birth, this intense holiness departs leaving greater potential for impurity.

NOTES

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6. For a recent article with many similarities to this chapter including the parallel to Luzzatto's ladder, see Ithamar Theodor, "Dharma and Halacha: Reflections on Hindu and Jewish Ethics" in *Dharma and Halacha: Comparative Studies in Hindu and Jewish Philosophy and Religion*, ed. Ithamar Theodor and Yudit Kornberg Greenberg (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018) 73–92.

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11. <https://www.swaminarayan.nu/youth/thal.shtml>

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17. Yosef Ahituv, "Modesty and Sexuality in Halakhic Literature," *Jewish Women's Archive*, January 19, 2019, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/modesty-and-sexuality-in-halakhic-literature>.

Chapter 9

Modernity

NEO-HINDUISM

Much has been written about the departure of the Jews from the ghetto and their assimilation into the life of modern culture. Emancipation let Jews become citizens in European countries and concurrently the adoption of Enlightenment values. Forgotten is that at the dawn of the nineteenth century, many Jews converted to Christianity in order to enter this new Western culture. In response was the creation of the modern forms of Judaism that could survive in the dominant culture.

They created modern forms of Judaism such as Reform, Neo-Orthodoxy, and the historical study of Judaism. These new forms were influenced by Protestant theology as well as modern thought, so that late nineteenth century Judaism formulated itself in novel ways, especially as ethical monotheism, this worldly-action and a transcendental universal God, eschewing Kabbalah, magic, folk practice, otherworldliness, and anything that would be seen as primitive or superstitious.

A similar trajectory occurred in Indian Hinduism.^[1] In the eighteenth century, the British colonized India, bringing with them a Protestant culture at odds with the Indian traditions. The British state-supported education system emphasized Western religions and Western thinking at the cost of indigenous ones. The British nurtured the aggressive propagation of Protestant Christianity along with the spreading among the people of anti-Hindu sentiments.

There were Protestant-inspired attacks on iconic imagery, on pantheism and continued belief in the beloved gods and goddesses of traditional Hinduism. There was an imposition of the Western scientific method, rationalism and skepticism on Hinduism. In addition, the models for religion of this British colonialism were liberal Unitarian Christianity and the Evangelical non-conformist religion of the missionaries.

Hindu modernism, also called *Neo-Vedanta* and Neo-Hinduism, are interpretations of Hinduism that developed in the nineteenth century, partly

in response to Western colonialism and orientalism, and partly an internal reformulation of perennial Indian ideas. Similar to the trajectory of modern Jewry, modern Hindu denominations paradoxically gave rise to national identity and the struggle for statehood. In the twenty-first century, we find reformulations in contradictory trends, including a return to ritualism and new age spirituality.

Brahmo Samaj and Ram Mohan Roy

The Brahmo Samaj was the first of the nineteenth century Hindu reform movements, founded in Kolkata in 1828 by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, thereafter resulting in the Brahmo religion in 1850 founded by Debendranath Tagore—better known as the father of Rabindranath Tagore. They strove toward a modernized, humanistic Hinduism with an eye open for societal problems.

Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833), born into a Brahmin family and the recipient of both Hindu and Muslim education eventually developed a strong sympathy for the Unitarian Christians, even writing a work on the message of Jesus. Roy eventually broke with Christianity and developed his Hindu reform movement.

Roy's most famous social reform is to campaign against widow burning (*sati*). Some of his other reforms included a rejection of Hindu pantheism, to be substituted with a more biblical notion of anthropomorphic monotheism; rejection of Hindu mythology, rejection of all iconic worship of “graven images,” rejection of sacrifice, and a repudiation of the doctrine of *avatars*.

The Brahmo Samaj movement strove toward monotheism, rejected the worship of forms and idols, and no longer regarded the Vedas or the medieval Hindu classics as the sole religious authority. The Brahmo Samaj put forth principles that they widely circulated, of not adoring any created thing, no graven images and no animate or inanimate objects. One served God by performing good deeds, by promoting charity, morality, piety, benevolence and virtue, and through strengthening the bonds of union between men of all religions and creeds.

Dayanand Saraswati and the Arya Samaj

Twenty-five years later, Dayanand Saraswati (1824–1883) founded the Arya Samaj (Noble Society), a Hindu reform movement of the Vedic tradition in 1875. He was a scholar of Vedic lore and Sanskrit language and was the first to give the call for Swarajya as “India for Indians.” Dayanand advocated a pure Hindu ideal of the Vedas without much of the later additions of medieval works, images, and temple worship. Dayanand’s contributions include his promoting of the equal rights for women, such as the right to education and reading of Indian scriptures, and his commentary on the Vedas in Hindi so that the common man might be able to read them. Dayanand was the first advocate for the equality of all people, and included the Dalits (untouchables) as part of his congregations. Dayanand claimed to reject all non-Vedic beliefs altogether. He considered Om (Aum) as the highest and most proper name for God, the only one Supreme Almighty based in the Infallible Authority of Vedas. Dayanand’s mission was a Universal Brotherhood through nobility as spelled out in Vedas.

The Arya Samaj enunciating Universal Principles as a code including the idea that all actions should be performed with the objective of benefiting mankind, as opposed to following dogmatic rituals or revering idols and symbols. In his own life, he interpreted *moksha* to be a lower calling (due to its benefit to one individual) than the calling to emancipate others in this world. Dayanand held the Vedas to be divine revelation, and refused to accept any suggestions to the contrary.

The Arya Samaj unequivocally condemned practices noted to be prevalent, such as idol worship, animal sacrifice, pilgrimages, priest craft, offerings made in temples, the castes, child marriages, meat eating, and discrimination against women on the grounds that all these lacked the true meaning of Hinduism. The Arya Samaj discourages dogma and symbolism and encourages skepticism in beliefs that run contrary to common sense and logic.

Arya Samaj established Vedic schools which taught modern subjects along with modern formulations of Vedic values and culture. The students were not allowed to perform traditional worship (*murti puja*) at the school, and were instead expected to perform meditative prayer using Vedic mantras from the Vedas and participate in fire service (*agnihotra*) twice daily. The Vedic school system closed down in 1876, but it serves as the model of an Enlightenment Vedic school for many subsequent schools, even

today in the twenty-first century.

The influence of Dayanand as reformer was so pervasive that few Hindus defend the former pre-Enlightenment religion, the same way that almost all modern Jews do not live the magical otherworldly Judaism of the seventeenth century; instead, they compete to show that they are this worldly, giving meaning to modern life. Most modern Hindus' practice explains ancient texts in modern values as shown by Dayanand.

Vivekananda (1863–1902)

Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), a Hindu monk and disciple of the nineteenth-century saint Ramakrishna, was a seminal figure in the introduction of the Indian philosophies of *Vedanta* and Yoga to the Western world. He was also instrumental in bringing Hinduism to the status of a major world religion, especially at his speeches during the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1893. He was a major force in the revival of Hinduism in India, and contributed to the concept of nationalism in colonial India. Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission.

The ideas of reformist thinkers influenced Vivekananda early on. Later he came under the influence of Ramakrishna (1836–1886), Indian mystic, yogi, and devotional pietist. The results were a modernist piety of universalism and self-development. Thus, for Vivekananda, *Vedanta* preaches a universal message of harmony, focusing on personal experience of the truth of God, on the divinity of man, and the universal spirit behind religion. Vivekananda taught that Shankara's *Advaita* monism best expressed the essence of Hinduism, yet he also followed Ramakrishna's dualistic worship of a transcendent deity.

Vivekananda's central idea was religious universalism, in which all religions are equal and true. Vivekananda, however, argued that in Hinduism, universalism found ideal articulation as the one religion that gets religion right. "Every other religion lays down certain fixed dogmas, and tries to force society to adopt them." In contrast, "the Hindus have discovered that the absolute can only be realized or thought of through the relative."^[2] Vivekananda emerged as a great advocate of Hindu philosophy, particularly

the *Vedantic*, to the Christian West.

According to Vivekananda, an important teaching he received from Ramakrishna was that *Jiva* is Shiva, meaning that man can equal God. Man is potentially divine, so service to man is indeed service to God. Vivekananda linked morality with control of the mind, seeing truth, purity, and unselfishness as traits that strengthened it. According to Vivekananda, religion is the idea that is raising the brute into man, and man unto God. Vivekananda believed education is the manifestation of perfection that enables a person to stand on his own feet with self-confidence and self-respect. Education is the manifestation of perfection already in men; hence, education should be man-making, character building, and aspiring to noble ideals.

According to Vivekananda, meditation (*dhyana*) was a bridge that connected the human soul to God, the Supreme. He defined meditation as a process through which one trains the mind to remain fixed. Vivekananda introduces the now-accepted Western terminology and definitions of mantra, meditation, and ideas of personal liberation. Science, health, and evolution become the essence of pure Vedic religion gained through direct personal experience from yogic practices.

The Ramakrishna movement that he founded does not identify itself with any particular Hindu group tradition. Therefore, Ramakrishna Math allows people even outside the Hindu faith to embrace monastic life.

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975) was an Indian philosopher and statesman who was the first vice president of India (1952–1962) and the second president of India from 1962 to 1967. He was one of India's most distinguished twentieth-century scholars of comparative religion and philosophy, with appointment as Spalding Professor of Eastern Religion and Ethics at the University of Oxford (1936–1952).

Radhakrishnan defended Hinduism against “uninformed Western criticism,” and contributed to the formation of a contemporary Hindu identity. He has been influential in shaping the understanding of Hinduism, in both India and the West. His picture hung in many buildings in Banaras

Hindu University.^[3] His thought takes the Upanishad and *Advaita* ideals of realization and knowledge and explains them in modern terms as intuition or religious experience with resonances to William James (1842–1910), F. H. Bradley (1846–1924), and Henri Bergson (1859–1941). Radhakrishnan argued for the importance of intuitive thinking as opposed to purely intellectual forms of thought. To him, theology and creeds are only symbols of religious experience or religious intuitions. Radhakrishnan presented Hinduism as a scientific religion based on facts, apprehended via intuition or religious experience. *Vedanta* offers the most direct intuitive experience and inner realization, which makes it the highest form of religion. Unlike the modernization of Judaism that focused on history, ethics, and rationality, Hindu modernization read classical texts as science and emphasized experience and intuition.

Radhakrishnan arranged the variety of religions hierarchically according to their apprehension of religious experience, giving *Advaita Vedanta* the highest place over Hindu rituals and over Western religions. This hierarchy of religions is officially part of MA curriculums at Banaras Hindu University and most other Indian departments of philosophy. Official textbooks present Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as inferior and less universal than *Vedanta*, which he considered the true and highest religion. Worshippers of a personal God, especially in the religions of the West, are caught in errors of understanding.

Finally, whereas traditional *Vedanta* had a fixed view of reality, many Neo-*Vedanta* followers, including Gandhi, endorsed the Jain concept of Anekantavada, the notion that truth and reality are perceived differently from diverse points of view, and that no single point of view is the complete truth. In the West this is explained using the parable of the blind men and the elephant, where each describes the elephant differently based on their limited perspective, each unable to grasp the complete truth.

Tagore

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), was a Bengali poet, philosopher, painter, and public intellectual from a Brahmin family. His father and grandfather were deeply involved with the Brahmo Samaj.

In 1912, at age fifty-one, he translated his latest selection of poems, entitled *Gitanjali*, into English. A friend of his showed his work to the world-famous William Butler Yeats, who was enthralled enough to recommend his work and write an introduction to the collection of poems. Tagore was an instant sensation, first in London literary circles, and soon after that, around the world. Less than a year later, he received the Nobel Prize for literature. He was the first non-Westerner to be so honored. In 1915, he was knighted by the British King George V, but soon renounced this honor in protest when the British massacred four hundred Indian demonstrators in Amritsar. He was referred to as “the Indian Goethe” by Albert Schweitzer, in that Tagore’s work included poems, novels, short stories, dramas, paintings, drawings, and music.

Religion

Tagore sets forth a new religion, which he calls the *Religion of Man* (1931). God is defined as the Universal Spirit, the Spirit of Life, the Eternal Spirit of human unity beyond our direct knowledge, the Super Soul that permeates all moving things; God dwells not in the heavens but in the heart of every human being as Man the Eternal. From Tagore’s perspective, man is constantly evolving, and divine union is his assured destination. Religion only finds itself when it “touches the *Brahman* in man,” otherwise it has no reason to exist. The truth, Tagore says, is inside us, like a song that has only to be sung to be mastered. It is like the morning that has only to be welcomed by raising the screens and opening the doors.

Truth in the *Religion of Man* is revealed to every person every day as an inspiration and inner source of divine wisdom. This truth comes through an illumination, almost like a communication of the universal self to the personal self. Every human being is capable of experiencing such illumination, although some people are more successful at actualizing this potentiality than others. We can increase experience through our participation in nature, arts literature, legends, symbols, and ceremonies.

Tagore believed that the task of the poet and artist is to direct our attention to the Infinite and to remind us that it ever dwells within each of us.

The idea that religion can be the peak of science, literature, and self-development was very attractive to diverse Jewish thinkers. Tagore's works were translated into Hebrew and his ideas of seeking perfection influenced everyone from the socialist A. D. Gordon to the strictly Orthodox Agudath Israel. Tagore was a firm Zionist but thought Zionism's universalism was weakened by its nationalism.

Tagore and Einstein

There was a brief conversation between Tagore and Albert Einstein that highlighted the differences between a modern Hindu and a Spinozistic Jew, like Einstein. On July 14, 1930, Albert Einstein welcomed Tagore into his home on the outskirts of Berlin. The two proceeded to have a conversation in which there was no meeting of minds. They stood poles apart philosophically. Einstein believed the world had a reality independent of the human mind. Tagore countered by stating that the world depended upon human consciousness for its reality.

Einstein: Do you believe in the Divine as isolated from the world?

Tagore: Not isolated. The infinite personality of Man comprehends the Universe. There cannot be anything that cannot be subsumed by the human personality, and this proves that the Truth of the Universe is human Truth. . . . When our universe is in harmony with Man, the eternal, we know it as Truth, we feel it as beauty.

Einstein: This is the purely human conception of the universe.

Tagore: There can be no other conception.

Einstein: Truth, then, or Beauty is not independent of Man?

Tagore: No.

Einstein: I cannot prove scientifically that Truth must be conceived as a Truth that is valid independent of humanity; but I believe it firmly. .

. . Then I am more religious than you are!^[4]

But God does not play dice, explained Einstein in a different interview. He was committed to the realism, determinism, and strict causality of classical physics.

In celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of Tagore's birth in 1961, the city of Tel Aviv named a leafy road after him near Tel Aviv University, intersecting with a road named for Einstein, thereby preserving their dialogue.

JUDAISM IN MODERN HINDUISM

Judaism as a religion is part of India's diversity. Jews are just thought of as another separate *dharma* like Parsees or in this case *dharma yahud*. We are not usually in their thinking about religion, but when we are, it is usually as a mischaracterization.

This chapter is not to criticize Hinduism, but to gauge the gap in understanding for many who rely on modern Hindu thought. Much of this will be self-correcting as they learn about Judaism. Bear in mind that Jews in India have never experienced any persecution or prejudice.

Here are three Hindu leaders to help us understand how they see us. (1) Swami Vivekananda—Judaism does not see its own idolatry. (2) Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan thought Judaism had been superseded by Christianity, (3) Surendranath Dasgupta—Judaism is primitive compared to Hinduism.

Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), as discussed in the last chapter, was responsible for bringing Hinduism to the West and was a major force in the revival of Hinduism in India. Swami Vivekananda preached the harmony of all religions, affirming them to be equally viable roads to reaching God.

Vivekananda's attitude toward Christ was one of great respect. He considered Christ to be a great Yogi, an ascetic, who had attained his divine status by way of a spiritual discipline. In fact, he firmly believed that the New Testament and Jesus Christ could not be fully understood unless and until they were interpreted within the framework of *Vedanta*, in which every person is in essence a god, and that with self-discipline, he can attain self-realization.

Vivekananda seems to have only known Judaism through the Bible as presented by Protestant missionaries. He thought that the Hindu and the Jews produced all religions but neither one is interested in converting others. He also thought that both had outdated priestly classes that focused on formal worship that needed to be tempered by a more spiritual approach, which is already inherent in both religions. "All through the Old Testament, you find the prophets challenging the superstitions of the priests. The outcome of this fight was the triumph of the prophets and the defeat of the priests" (CW, 8, p. 5.). This gave the Jews a spiritual force. "What may be that force which causes this afflicted and suffering people, the Hindu, and the Jewish too (the two races from which have originated all the great religions of the world) to survive, when other nations perish? The cause can only be their spiritual force" (CW, 1, 383).

In his "Addresses on Bhakti Yoga" Vivekananda states: "A book is the most tangible form of God. Think of the Jews; if they had not had a book, they would have simply melted into the world. But that keeps them up; the Talmud keeps them together, in spite of the most horrible persecution." In another place, he writes: "For 1,900 years you have been trying to crush the Jews. Why could you not crush them? . . . Ignorance and bigotry can never crush truth" (CW, 7, 422).

Vivekananda in seeking to defend Hindu images painted Judaism as also having idolatrous elements.

Among the Jews, Idol worship is condemned but they had a temple in which was kept a chest which they called an ark, in which the Tables of the Law were preserved and above the chest were two figures of angels with wings outstretched between which the Divine presence was supposed to manifest itself as a cloud. (CW 3, p. 362.)

Vivekananda states in several places the question that India may have not solved its primitive religion problem, but the biblical faiths themselves have not produced advanced religion. Hindus may still have idols but Western religions do not produce great spiritual swamis. It is worth tolerating idols if we produce such great mystics.^[5]

Vivekananda maintained a warm friendship with Rabbi Louis Grossman of Detroit, who supported and defended him when Vivekananda faced

extremely harsh criticism from Christian missionaries. Grossman even invited Vivekananda to his congregation.^[6]

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975), Indian philosopher and statesman painted that the Hindu religion is marked “by an eminently rational character” since in his eyes, “the Bramanical civilization” trains its thinkers to judge issues without emotion and to rely on “the fundamentals of experience.” In contrast, Radhakrishnan considered Judaism through the Protestant thought of his time, painting Judaism as legalistic and primitive compared to Christianity. For him, Jesus was hampered by his Jewish heritage and tolerated the inferior Mosaic law which was far less than the highest ideals. He absorbed the anti-Judaism of late nineteenth-century British culture. The problem is that his thought is still required reading in university courses in the twenty-first century, with few instructors who have any ability to correct these stereotypes.^[7]

The third author, Surendranath Dasgupta (1887–1952), was a scholar of Sanskrit and philosophy noted for his authoritative *A History of Indian Philosophy*, five volumes (1922–1955). Dasgupta earned a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Cambridge and could explain Indian thought in terms of British philosophy. He produced shelf reference works on Indian philosophy still used today. Educated Hindus know Dasguta’s opinions even if most times, indirectly. Dasguta is also known as the author under whom Eliade studied about Indian religion at the University of Calcutta. Dasgupta’s approach is to show the primitive nature of Judaism and that it does not have any alleged superiority over Hinduism.

The Jewish God is always anxious that the sons of Israel do not worship other gods than himself and like a king who wishes to keep their subjects loyal to himself imposes the cruelest punishment on the disloyal and the rebel. . . . He . . . demonstrates His miracles to stun them with awe and fear. But this only shows that the people at this stage were not capable of realizing the force of anything but fear. The God here is almost a materialistic god . . . which would not for a moment forgive our transgression . . . Judaism’s revelation was of prohibition and not revelations of God’s nature or any kind of spiritual experience.^[8]

Dasguta continues the passage below and demonstrates that the high philosophic position of the Upanishads was already superior to this primitive Jewish position. He also shows how Jewish ritual is as primitive as Hindu ritual.

Often in the scripture of older people such as that of the Hindus, the Parsees, and the Jews regulations regarding food and drink and defilement appear to have the same moral force as those regarding social offences of a moral nature. It seems that from an original sense of mischief accruing in consequence . . . gradually the idea of sin grew. . . . The primitive idea was that it was some sort of material that corrupts a person, produces sickness, makes one amenable to bad fortunes, and may also stick to the person and produce misery even after death in the ghostly conditions of the soul or in Hell. Durkheim explained that on the feast of Tabernacles the Jews do ritual in which the motion in the air causes the rain to fall based on correct performance.^[9]

He also sought to show that biblical culture is anti-scientific compared to the rational Indian culture. For him, evolution repudiates the Old Testament doctrine of creation.

GURUS

I was at a conference where I met a man from California, who told me he was managing the American tour of an Indian Guru. I asked him how he became involved with the Guru, to which he responded that he attended the Guru's meditation workshop where he was told to just meditate. The guru told this man that he needed no books, no ritual, no religion, no theology, no need to think about theology; all he needed was meditation as a path. He said this changed his life.

How does this single point of Hinduism fit into the bigger picture? Hinduism allows those who are on the path of liberation to be free from the householder's duties to community and ritual. The many holy men, or *sadhus* throughout India focus on meditation, yoga, and asceticism as specific feats of religious devotion. Religious schools and ashrams of holy

men coexisted alongside orthodoxy of ritual consistency, in which the teaching of a guru was able to, relatively freely, reinterpret Hindu doctrines and philosophy for his own purposes. This led to the creation of a fragmented and diverse religious milieu, allowing a fertile field for religious innovations, schisms and heterodoxies, alliances to the temporal powers, and rivalries between gurus who travelled in the country to disseminate their teachings, challenge each other in argument, and win disciples.

In India, the guru is seen as an enlightened being who gave up world possessions and fame in order to be devoted to leading the community. The guru is also usually credited with channeling light and blessings, miraculous powers, and the ability to steer the adept's mind away from hindrances and toward realization. Gurus adapt religious practices and beliefs that seem utterly foreign to their Western audience, by making them more appropriate for the target audience. Several gurus have indeed travelled all around the world, and created transnational organizations that disseminate their teachings in Europe, North America, and elsewhere. The plurality and competitiveness of this religious market allowed the success of contemporary forms of Hinduism in Western societies since the 1960s.

In most cases, these modern ashrams still have ritual and a Hindu cultural context, and sometimes they even have extensive ritual and *puja*. But for the Western spiritual seeker, the greater emphasis is on the daily routine of waking up early followed by a full day of devotional chanting, yoga, meditation, and *satsang*, the spiritual discourse and gathering of inspirational talks along with question and answer sessions.

These new guru teachers generally offer a simpler and non-ritual approach. They also do not have to argue sources and philosophies. Many of the recent gurus claim that their teachings are universal, above any religion, and scientifically proven formulas for well-being.^[10] Spending time in a guru's ashram can be life changing and character forming, similar to time in a Yeshiva.

Ramana Maharshi

The best and most enduring example of a guru who changed many lives is Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950) who is widely acknowledged as being one

of the outstanding Indian gurus of modern times. At the age of sixteen, he became enlightened. He then went through a period of great austerity, finally traveling to the holy mountain Arunachala, at Tiruvannamalai, where he remained for the rest of his life.^[11]

Ramana taught a path of silence and meditation as a means of self-inquiry. He directed people to look inward rather than seek outside themselves for realization. True divinity resides in one's own heart as the true self. Principally, his concept of self-inquiry is the constant attention to the inner awareness of "I" or "I am" of the Upanishads. The goal is to discover the unreality of the "I"-thought through inquiring the nature of the "I"-thought. The "I"-thought will disappear and only "I-I" or self-awareness remains, which is self-realization or liberation.

Ramana mainly remained silent and allowed his followers to confront their selves. Through his silence, devotees experience a simple change of view to "the pure bliss of True Being." In later years, a community grew up around him, where he was available twenty-four hours a day to visitors. He responded to questions, but always insisted that silence was the purest teaching. Ramana warned against considering self-inquiry as an intellectual exercise. Done properly, it involves fixing the attention firmly and intensely on the feeling of "I," without thinking. Attention must be fixed on the "I" until the sense of "I" disappears and the self is realized. If one seeks within, then the "I" vanishes. Our "true nature" is "simple Being," without thoughts.

Ramana Maharshi often cited the Bible. In particular, he quoted the statement "I am that I am," to support his contention that God's real nature was "I am." For Ramana, the verse in Exodus, "I am that I am" is the essence of the *Vedanta* equivalent to the Upanishad statement "I am *Brahman*." Ramana interprets Exodus as implying that the "I" of the verse is the human self, the divine being in the self, in which the self is the name of God. For him, the message of God to Moses was that "I am" means that if you understand your own soul, then you know God.

He also frequently cited "Be still and know that I am God" from Psalm 46:10, as proof that the stillness of meditation is the method by which "I am" is revealed. In addition, he taught that "I am" is not merely the real name of God, but it makes up the core of every person. If one could become aware of one's real identity, "I am," then one simultaneously experiences

the “I am” that is God and the statement that makes up the world’s appearance.

Ramana criticized Jews and Christians for clinging to the idea of a permanently real and separate ego, claiming the greatest Western mystics did not do so. He also maintains that the Jewish God is wholly and eternally separate from the world. Whereas Ramana taught that the self is the sole reality—the world is only part of an undifferentiated reality.

Judaism, in contrast, does not relinquish the self to this point. Martin Buber or Abraham Joshua Heschel both see man as directly relating to God as an individual called to respond. Even in Jewish mystical strains, for example, Chabad Hasidism, as expressed in *Tanya*, we are a divine soul seeking to transcend our animal soul through Torah and mizvot.

Other Gurus: Paramahansa Yogananda and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi

The guru Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952) introduced millions of Westerners to the teachings of meditation and *Kriya* Yoga through his book, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946), which has since been translated into thirty-six languages. In 1920, Yogananda went to the United States, where he attracted a number of celebrity followers, establishing an international center for Self-Realization Fellowship in Los Angeles, California, to disseminate worldwide his teachings on yoga and its tradition of meditation. Yogananda was the first Hindu teacher of yoga to spend a major portion of his life in America.^[12] For him, “The true basis of religion is not belief, but intuitive experience. Intuition is the soul’s power of knowing God. To know what religion is really all about, one must know God.”^[13] His goals were to teach scientific techniques for attaining direct personal experience of God, and that the purpose of life is personal evolution through self-effort into God Consciousness.

Another famous teacher known in the West was Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1918–2008, also known as the Maharishi) who developed the Transcendental Meditation technique and through this practice became the guru of a worldwide organization that has been characterized in multiple ways, including as a new religious movement and as non-religious. In the

late 1960s and early 1970s, he achieved fame as the guru to the Beatles, the Beach Boys, and other celebrities. In the late 1970s, he started the TM-Sidhi program that claimed to offer practitioners the ability to levitate and to create world peace. By the time of his death, there were nearly one thousand TM training centers around the world.

The practice of TM attracted many Jews and as mentioned in chapter 1, the chief rabbi of Tel Aviv, Rabbi David Hayim Halevi, permitted its practice if done without bowing, offerings, or mantras to deities.

Hatha Yoga and Shivananda

I am often asked: Is yoga part of Hindu worship? Or can an observant Jew practice yoga?

Yoga is a broad Hindu tradition of ethics, meditation, science, and worship. It was reduced in the twentieth-century West, removing almost all of the moral and religious elements and condensed into the single element of techniques for physical positions, *asanas*. Then, in recent decades two opposite trends emerged: the reclamation of techniques for their original Hindu spiritual purpose and the denial of their very integration within Hinduism.

Hindus find it offensive to be told by Westerners that yoga is not part of Hindu much like Jews would find it offensive to be told Kabbalah is a universal truth as opposed to one that is specifically Jewish. Yet, many Jews who have studied and practiced the denatured yoga for decades are offended to be told that their routine has nothing to do with Hinduism.

American yoga of the 1950s was generally a form of calisthenics desiccated of its Indian origins. The New Age brought some of the religion back into it, and now the training of yoga teachers in Indian ashrams restores yoga to its Hindu context. Today, any given yoga class can fall anywhere on the spectrum.

Several popular yoga magazines regularly refer to yoga as “ancient Indian,” “Eastern,” or “Sanskritic.” These descriptors seem to avoid assiduously the term “Hindu” out of fear, we can only assume, that honestly presenting the origins of yoga would spell disaster for what has become a lucrative commercial enterprise. For an example of this trend, the American Yoga Association completely delinks yoga from Hinduism.

In light of this distance between historic origin and American practice, some Hindus reclaim yoga as Hindu by reverting to aspects of its original theological context. They claim that yoga is entirely about overcoming karma from past lives, hence against Western religious ideas of a personal God.

In July 2013, a California superior court in San Diego said that children who are taught yoga in school would not be aware of the religious elements; therefore, it does not violate religion in a public school. The Hindu American Foundation, while applauding the decision for distinguishing between two types of yoga, argued that beyond physical exercise, yoga is also a holistic spiritual path that leads to liberation. They released a position paper that both condemns yoga's appropriation and argues that yoga today is wholly misunderstood. Most often, Americans identify yoga solely with Hatha Yoga exercises and body positions. This is only one part of the practice of Raja Yoga, which is actually an eightfold path designed to lead the practitioner to *moksha*, or salvation. Indeed, yogis believe that to focus on the physicality of yoga without the spirituality is to be utterly rudimentary and deficient.

Asanas

The physical aspects of yoga, known as Hatha Yoga, in the Yoga Sutras are only two lines. Patanjali (II:46) defines *asanas* as what is “steady and pleasant.” An alternate translation might be a “motionless and agreeable form.” Asana is thus a posture that one can hold for a period while staying relaxed, steady, comfortable, and motionless. Patanjali does not list any specific asana, although it offers the terse suggestion of the “posture one can hold with comfort and motionlessness.” In the next verse: “*asanas* are perfected over time by relaxation of effort with meditation on the infinite.” This combination and practice stops the quivering of body. Classical Hindu texts commenting on Patanjali's sutra state that one requirement of correct posture is to keep breast, neck, and head erect with proper spinal posture. Vyasa, in his commentary on Patanjali's treatise suggests twelve such postures.

Nevertheless, various yoga *asanas* were practiced for millennia before. For example, in an eighth-century bas-relief in Mahabalipuram, called Descent of the Ganges, includes the panel of a cat standing on one leg, as an

austerity. Travelers' reports from the early medieval period onwards highlight the practice of asana by ascetics, usually seeing it as a form of *tapas*, or self-mortification. By the thirteenth century, textual descriptions of eighty-four or more *asanas* in a variety of yoga exist in the form of manuals, while, by the fifteenth century, texts written by Hathapradipika present the *asanas* as a general path. At the end of the nineteenth century, Vivekananda, the great popularizer of Indian religion in the West, revived the study of Patanjali but viewed Hatha Yoga as an inferior pursuit compared to Raja Yoga of meditation, perhaps not even a spiritual practice at all.

In the early twentieth century, modern Hatha Yoga began with the popular European physical culture movement of gymnastics and bodybuilding that was taken to India by the YMCA and by the British military. As Indian national pride developed in the early twentieth century, so too did a desire to demonstrate that India had its own system of strength and fitness. Hatha Yoga was reinvented in this period by grafting a careful selection of its elements onto the international culture of fitness. Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (1888–1989) transformed the yoga positions into a form of modern physical culture in Mysore at the Sanskrit college in the 1930s. Krishnamacharya developed his own system of the traditional Hatha Yoga molded by the physical fitness culture. Krishnamacharya's studio was housed in an old gymnastics hall, containing suspended ropes and gymnastic equipment that he used in his classes, and he was socially acquainted with India's bodybuilders and fitness instructors. Krishnamacharya introduced a style of continuous flow of movement, called *vinyasa*, which uses the movements of Sun Salutation (*Surya Namaskar*) to lead into each asana and then out again. The Sun Salutation has no connection to sun worship or any ancient practice, rather Krishnamacharya created it as part of his method. Each movement is coordinated with prescribed breathing and gaze points (*drishti*), which focus the eyes and instill meditative concentration.

Eventually, Krishnamacharya standardized the pose sequences into three series consisting of primary, intermediate, and advanced *asanas*. Today's focus on physical *asanas* is due to Krishnamacharya's influence. Yoga's resurgence in India owes a great deal to his countless lecture tours and demonstrations during the 1930s, and his four most famous disciples: K. Pattabhi Jois, B. K. S. Iyengar, Indra Devi, and Krishnamacharya's son, T. K. V.

Desikachar, each of whom played a huge role in popularizing yoga in the West. I will briefly look at two of them.

Indra Devi (1899–2002, born Zhenia Labunskaia, in Latvia) was a friend of the Mysore royal family who moved to Hollywood, where she became known as the “First Lady of Yoga,” attracting celebrity students like Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Arden, Greta Garbo, and Gloria Swanson.

B. K. S. Iyengar (1918–2014) largely abandoned his mentor’s flowing style of practice. Instead, he emphasized the nature of internal alignment. Since many people less fit than Krishnamacharya’s young students came to Iyengar for instruction, he learned to use props to help them and he began to develop asana as a healing practice, creating specific therapeutic programs. In addition, he came to see the body as a temple and asana as prayer. “The needs of the body are the needs of the divine spirit, found within.” There are echoes of nineteenth century New Thought movement and transcendentalism.

The popularization of yoga as body movement, without connection to Hinduism, in the United States owes much to Iyengar’s student Rodney Yee, who appears in many popular videos, and Richard Hittleman, a well-known TV yogi of the 1970s, who trained with Devi. Other teachers have borrowed from several Krishnamacharya-based styles, creating unique approaches. Most teachers, even of styles not directly linked to Krishnamacharya such as Shivananda Yoga and Bikram Yoga, have aspects of Krishnamacharya’s teachings.

Shivananda

To take one example that widely influenced the Jewish community, I will look at Swami Shivananda (1887–1963) who established his ashram in 1932 in Rishikesh in India, and founded the Divine Life Society, which aims to disseminate yoga, presented as a means of individual and social progress. Shivananda quickly became a renowned guru in India, as he endlessly participated in conferences and religious tours. [\[14\]](#)

Unlike more athletic yoga programs, Shivananda training revolves around frequent relaxation and emphasizes full, yogic breathing. Swami Shivananda taught a Neo-*advaitan* doctrine, dependent on Vivekananda,

that God is within us and whatever we see, hear, touch, or feel is also a manifestation of God. He saw only God in all existence. One attains divinity while living in the present surroundings and discharging all duties and obligations.

Swami Shivananda explained yoga in a universal manner, in which yoga respected all religions, saints, and sages. He believed that the fundamental principles of all religions are the same, and all saints teach us and lead us to the same truth. For him, yoga is not a religion, but an aid to seeking the basic truths in all religions. Emblazoned on the walls of some ashrams: “God is one, paths are many.”

Shivananda was a prolific author, having written 296 books on many subjects, including almost all elements of Hinduism and Hindu culture. He wrote on rituals, festivals, and Hindu denominations other than his own. In his works, he emphasized not only the practical application of yoga philosophy over theoretical knowledge, but he also created a broad synthesis of traditional and modern values—working with allegory and moral understandings. He replaced much of the prior literature’s magical and supernatural claims with scientific and natural understandings. Shivananda’s work on Hindu religious life shows many similarities to *Horeb* by Neo-Orthodox rabbi, Samson Raphael Hirsch, or the modern biblical commentary of Rabbi Joseph H. Hertz. Many books produced in India and reprinted online rely heavily on Shivananda’s modern explanations. Shivananda’s allegorical and scientific approach, and the many influenced by it, are mainstays of the contemporary Hindu spiritual and allegorical understanding of their own tradition.

Vishnu-Devananda (1927–1993), a yoga instructor in Shivananda’s ashram, left India to open his first ashram in Quebec, in 1959. He founded other Shivananda Yoga *Vedanta* Centers and ashrams all over the world, including in the Bahamas, and Tel Aviv. It is one of the largest training bodies of yoga teachers in the world, having produced over twenty-eight thousand graduates since 1969. His motto was, “Health is Wealth. Peace of Mind is Happiness. Yoga Shows the Way.” His books, *The Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga* (1959) and *Meditation and Mantras* (1978), established him as an authority because they offered Western textbooks on the method of Yoga.

On August 30, 1971, Vishnu-Devananda flew to Northern Ireland in his Peace Plane, a twin-engine painted by artist Peter Max. His Vedantic

message, “Man is free as a bird,” challenged all man-made borders and mentally constructed boundaries. Upon landing, actor Peter Sellers joined him and they walked through the streets of Belfast, chanting a song called “Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself.” Later that same year, on October 6, he took off from Tel Aviv to fly over the war-ridden Suez Canal. He continued eastward, “bombing” Pakistan and India with flowers and peace leaflets.

Vishnu-Devananda formulated the teachings of classical yoga into five principles: proper exercise, proper breathing, proper relaxation, proper diet (vegetarian), and proper thinking (meditation and positive thinking), teaching a wellness lifestyle of vegetarianism, yoga *asanas*, meditation, positive thinking, and Ayurveda healing. This way of life is not the classic *advaitan* view; it was, rather, a focus on peace of mind and life through a systematic mastery of mind, body, and emotions. The ashrams have an ancillary priest for requisite daily *puja*, but there is little focus on traditional piety and rituals.

Veronique Altglas, a scholar of contemporary spirituality at Queen’s University, Belfast, notes that the adaptation of yoga to Western societies has often entailed a de-ethnicization and a simplification of the religious message. Shivananda Yoga’s discourse on India’s timeless wisdom and religious supremacy is clearly identity-affirming of yoga, but also a universalistic message mostly removed from many of its Hindu roots. In addition to simplicity, these exportable and transcultural religious teachings give precedence to practices over Hindu doctrines and rituals. Shivananda insisted that his *Vedanta*-oriented teachings were accessible to all, irrespective of social class, religion, nationality, gender, and so forth. Shivananda Yoga *Vedanta* Centers say “Yoga is not a religion, but a science of religion.” They explain that yoga does not come from Hinduism, rather Hinduism originates in yoga.

His books have a remarkable didactic approach, presenting yoga, meditation and rules of the salvation path in the form of handbooks or lists of simple and concise principles. He placed emphasis on the practical aspects, rather than on the philosophical contents of the message. Yoga is a tool enabling control of the mind for the attainment of well-being and self-fulfillment, and the development of one’s own potential. The emphasis on the efficiency, power, and positive effects of religious practices reveal a rationalization of the salvation path as a scientific method, the effects of

which are objectively verifiable.

Shivananda's centers organize vacation programs in addition to a well-known Teacher Training Course (TTC) producing many yoga instructors, especially those in the Jewish community. They also offer workshops to teach willpower and success, relaxation, breaking bad habits, focusing on the positive, and having a healthy lifestyle. According to Altglas, they cater to an upper-middle-class lifestyle that includes extensive travel, artistic activities, yoga, and alternative therapies as part of the exploration of a wide range of paths, including Buddhism, personal development, and holistic therapies.

Shivananda's teachings are often described as a universal science of life, a universal mechanics, and a spiritual technology, revealing their instrumental, rationalized, and individualized appropriation of religious teachings: the user chooses different means according to their effectiveness and adequacy for dealing with personal needs. The appropriation of these religious tools also makes the user autonomous, and enables him or her to take care of and take control of his or her self-perfection. All of these approaches downplay their connection to Hinduism.

Jewish Hatha Yoga and Why Connect Yoga and Judaism?

There are a large number of Jewish yoga teachers and even Orthodox Jewish yoga teachers today. How do Jews relate to the association of yoga with Hinduism?

Some Jews who accept yoga say yoga is really a universal science or even kabbalistic. Some approving yogis say yoga is a universal science and the core of every religion. Disapproving Jews say it is a Hindu practice and it is *avodah zarah* (foreign worship). Disapproving yogis say there is no Jewish yoga. Yoga is Hindu.

However, for a growing body of people there are deep, logical, and undeniable links between the practice of yoga as an expansive spiritual practice and their contemporary practice of Judaism, and even as the means by which the Jewish seeker draws inspiration and taps into a spiritual life. For many of the Jews attracted to yoga, the approach gives them a theology, an access to God, a therapeutic means, a spirituality, and a way to cope with life. Yoga serves as an entrance into a meaningful connection of the soul and

the Infinite, many times connecting them to a spirituality they could not initially find in Judaism.

There is even an association of Jewish yoga teachers. One American Jewish teacher wrote that it was through yoga that she eventually was led to explore her Jewish roots. Some of these Jewish yoga instructors attempt to create a kosher yoga. One of these teachers records her discovery of the need to create a kosher yoga.

Our teacher asks us to bring our hands together in prayer position, in front of our chest. I hear a loud, echoing “Namaste!” from the mouths of all present, including me, followed by bows toward the floor and toward the teacher.

I have the urge to shout out, “Who are you bowing to?”

As I brought these threads together, I could no longer rationalize bowing to the teacher, or indeed bowing at all while sitting. Jews are not to bow to anything or anyone other than G-d. Moreover, why was I, a Jew, using the language of a Hindu prayer?

After class, I asked the swami to give me a copy of the chant, and I rushed home, eager to find out its meaning:

“I prostrate before the sage Patanjali who has thousands of radiant, white heads [in his form as the divine serpent, Ananta] and who has, as far as his arms, assumed the form of a man holding a conch shell, a wheel [representing infinite time] and a sword [discrimination] Om.”^[15]

An example of a Judaized yoga class begins with a ten-minute warm up, a fifteen-minute lesson from a Jewish text, a meditation based on a theme chosen from the Kabbalah, weekly Torah portion or a Chassidic teaching, and an hour-long series of yoga poses. Some do yoga with Hebrew shapes and give a Jewish veneer to the practice, and still others use the culture and system of a yoga practice in order to teach Hasidut, Kabbalah, and Jewish practice.^[16]

Other teachers change the names of the yoga positions to English names because they assume the Sanskrit names have religious significance, but if you do not use the original names then it is not religious.^[17]

Another approach creates yoga poses similar to Hatha Yoga based upon the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, claiming to be doing “Prophetic Jewish Meditation” and working with the spiritual and energetic attributes of the Hebrew letters. The practice is ascending a series of seven stages or techniques, based on the chakras, each giving greater access to God, which it combines with contemporary Breslover Chassidim and singing and storytelling.

This approach and other similar Jewish approaches claim that these yoga techniques were lost and they are reviving them, or that they were reserved for secret circles of kabbalists as an oral tradition. As supposed proofs, they offer the prophet Elijah bending down to the ground and putting his face between his knees (1 Kings 18:42). Rabbi Shimon Ben Gamliel would rejoice in the temple by putting two thumbs into the earth, in order to suspend his body in the air, and kiss the ground, then straighten up (Tractate Sukkah, 53a).

Years ago, the former Sefardi chief rabbi of Tel Aviv, Rabbi David Halevi, permitted the practice of Transcendental Meditation (TM) as long as one avoids the opening worship, mentioning of gods, and bowing to gods or the guru. The same approach has been extended to yoga for those who studied the secular version of just physical exercise.^[18]

Even the Chabad rabbi, Tzvi Freeman, a popular web-based writer, was asked: is yoga kosher? He answered that yoga is not prohibited. Freeman states that God made ways to maintain the body as part of the created human nature. But, “it was inevitable that each culture associated these discoveries to their beliefs [. . .] because of this, should we outlaw a benefit G-d placed purposely in His world for us?” He quotes the Talmud, asking: “would any benefit from the sun, the moon, the ocean, the wind, fire and air, water and earth [. . .] have to be outlawed, since all of these have been either the object or device of pagan worship?” From this, he concludes that meditation methods and yoga, as long as it is “stripped of their association with Hindu deities,” can be used “to better serve its Creator and know Him in all our ways.”^[19]

Ironically, Freeman concludes that if any position is problematic it would be the sun salutation, “there are a few postures and sequences that are difficult to strip of their Hindu context [. . .] such as the sequence called

the sun salute.”^[20] However, as noted above, the Sun Salutation is an entirely twentieth-century piece of choreography, coordinating yoga postures into a series of movements that unfortunately were branded with a planetary name, that made people think it is an ancient worship practice. Due to pressure, he removed the post from the web.

Despite these debates, one of the local right-wing Orthodox synagogues near my home posted an announcement recently about yoga classes in the memory of the deceased, in which yoga has replaced Torah as a way to raise the departed soul, *le'ilui nismat*. That yoga is now a practice that one can dedicate the way one dedicates Torah study is fascinating.

DIASPORA TEMPLES

Hinduism has been modernizing and remaining contemporary for two hundred years, much in the same way Judaism has been. As discussed in an earlier chapter, as a means of entering modernity, philosophic ideals of the *Neo-Vedanta* created a universal view similar to the Jewish Enlightenment and Reform. Now, in the twenty-first century, there has been a return to ritual and classic texts akin to Jewish Orthodoxy and a creation of the Hindu cultural center similar to many Jewish synagogues functioning as a cultural center.^[21]

Contemporary Hindus now belong to a diverse variety of new denominations and organizations. When you meet a Hindu, the first questions are to which contemporary group do they belong, and how does it differ from others. When you meet a Jew, you do not ask if they are Sadducee or Essene or Karaite. Rather, you ask which late twentieth-century denomination they most identify as, such as Reform, Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Renewal, Post-denominational, Aish HaTorah, Chabad, AIPAC, or J-Street. Contemporary Hindus belong to contemporary Hindu groups adopt a variety of approaches in their modernism from progressive to traditional, mediated by a myriad of gurus and ashrams. Many of these diverse denominations have become lay driven and dynamic.

Diaspora

According to Syracuse University professor of religion, Joanne Punzo Waghorne, in her *Diaspora of the Gods*, contemporary Hinduism has made a double movement, first from the small villages to the big cities of India and then to the new countries of the Hindu diaspora.

Many new temples in the diaspora have a synaplex quality whereby they combine many deities into a single temple, emphasizing the essential unity of the divine. They merge the different ethnic, regional, denominational, and linguistic groups into a single whole, melding *bhakti*, philosophy, diverse ritual practices, and meditation under a single roof.

Temples are generally led by wealthy donors, boards of trustees, officers, and lay leadership. The priests are hired. The lay congregants have direct experience with leading the temple. Once only kings could build temples, now the middle class can. Temples are now hubs of social services and social life. They provide social services for the poor, aid to the elderly, and help for immigrants. They also have youth movements, social events, Sunday school, after-school language classes for children, music classes, summer camps, family retreats, political evenings, and sporting events. This change to Hindu temples is similar to how the synagogue makes itself into a social center. They are more Mordechai Kaplan's vision of the cultural center, a place for a variety of social events for an ethnicity, than a mystical doctrine.

Most Neo-Vedanta Modernist Hindus of the mid-twentieth century were rationalist and downplayed ritual. In contrast, the new middle class professionals of the twenty-first century, who are building the diaspora temples, adhere to greater amounts of ritual and seek to create a Hinduism that affirms traditionalism. They follow gurus, support old values and pay for the upkeep of the tradition, through funding priests and temples. Within their own temples, the Hindu tradition returns as personal spirituality, lifestyle coach and family values more than maintenance of the cosmos. In the modern presentation of Hinduism, not only is religion and science compatible, but the rituals and worship of the deities are considered as scientific, tapping into the unseen forces the same way electricity does. *Dharma* practices all reflect advanced scientific principles and infinite spiritual forces.

Many modern temples in India are under civil authority, such as the Birla temples in many cities, which allow Dalit and non-Hindus to attend and

participate. Now, in the last few decades the new temples try to be multi-caste inclusive, which is itself a middle class approach. Stable, middle-class professional life defines the tradition, bypassing traditional emphasis on the Brahmins and ascetics. Instead, there is strong emphasis on preaching and teaching to the laity. Middle-class devotees have little patience with philological arguments of the old *pandits*—they want their Hindu teachings without the tedious textual nuances.

In the last decades, a new deity has emerged, half-Ganesh, half-Hanuman. Until recently, Hanuman was only a servant of Ram, but he has grown in importance as a signifier of the in-between-ness, creative fixer, amorphous, rising middle class. So too is Ganesh, as mediator, a role in a middle-class world of prosperity but living with certain tensions.

Much of this is similar to Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's Neo-Orthodoxy, middle-class values become the eternal tradition. However, some of the new Hindu temple builders admit they are doing innovative changes, balancing tradition and change, more akin to liberal or conservative Judaism. However, in almost all of the current versions, there is an acceptance of science, morality, and citizenship, egalitarian and moving beyond caste, as well as a trend toward monotheism. I will look at three of them near my home in New Jersey.

USA: Ganesh Temple, Flushing, New York

Since 1965, there has been a large immigration of highly educated immigrants from India to the United States, where they are slowly building an American Hinduism. Here in New Jersey, there are a variety of separate temples that function as immigrant benevolence societies for different groups, including: Gujarati, Hindi, Marathi, Malayalam, Kannady, and Tamil Hindus, similar to Jewish *landsmanschaft* organizations. [\[22\]](#)

Nearby, in Flushing, New York (a neighborhood in Queens Borough), the first Hindu Temple Society of North America began in 1970 and construction took seven years to complete. A large number of skilled workers trained in temple construction came from India and imported all of the materials from their home country. They built the temple in south Indian style of temple architecture, and the statues were sculpted from black

granite, as opposed to north Indian temples, that use white marble to sculpt idols. The temple was symbolically consecrated on July 4, 1977, in a special ceremony meant to bless the idols, thereby opening the temple to the public as the first Hindu temple to open publicly in America.

Today, the Ganesh Temple has grown to be a community complex that includes offices, a senior center, and a community center that has an auditorium, classrooms, and two wedding halls. In addition to providing a place of worship, the temple offers classes on Indian and Hindu culture as well as mathematics, various academic subjects and SAT preparations.

Ganesh is the widely-worshipped, elephant-headed Hindu deity known as a remover of obstacles, a god of new beginnings, and a purveyor of wisdom and intellect. Hindus pray to Ganesha before they start something so that obstacles, which one is sure to encounter, can be overcome. Ganesh appeals to an aspirational middle class worried about success and overcoming difficulties in life. The temple has many *avatars* of Vishnu from both North and South India and a Shiva *linga*. One can worship there no matter what denomination one belonged to in the old country.

The temple organization chose Dr. Uma Mysorekar, a woman, as president of the Ganesh Temple. Mysorekar had arrived in America with her parents as a young woman and practiced medicine for many years. Dr. Mysorekar explains Hindu law and practice, not as obedience to ancient laws, but rather as the expectation in life of everyone having a mission to fulfill. The goal in life is to understand ourselves and in so doing, realize his or her personal mission. All religions have rituals to reinforce correct behaviors and remind us of our personal missions. The temple has a basic decorum of no personal fruit and flower offerings in the temple, except as bought in the concession and then efficiently removed immediately after use; they also strictly follow the fire department codes by extinguishing ritual fires in a prompt fashion.

I must point out that a few miles away from the Ganesh Temple, in the same borough; there is a laity-run storefront temple with a collection of statues, both Hindu and Sikh, run as a folkways-style house of worship. Visiting this storefront, one can watch the immigrants constantly violating the rules of Hinduism, including the wearing of shoes into the temple, or not performing the rituals correctly. Like the laity-run storefront, Jewish synagogues of the Lower East Side in Manhattan, one hundred years ago,

run without knowledge of Torah, one finds congregants who want the feel of the old country but who lack knowledge of either rules or thought.

Swaminarayan Hinduism—BAPS

Swaminarayan Hinduism denomination is a modern Vaishnava spiritual tradition, originating in the state of Gujarat, in which followers offer devotion to and worship the eighteenth-century guru Swaminarayan, described as the last of the traditional saints and first of the modern reformers, as a form of supreme deity Para-brahma. [\[23\]](#)

A subset of this tradition was formed in 1907 as a denomination called Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Sanstha (BAPS). BAPS grew into a worldwide religious and civic organization that promotes spiritual guidance through the leader Akshar as the Gunatit Guru, who is believed to be in close proximity to Swaminarayan.

Unlike some of the modernist Neo-*Vedanta* movements, BAPS does not think the self can elevate itself as an act of self-transcendence. Rather, the followers of BAPS live according to the spiritual guidance of the guru who is the one able to elevate the soul (*jiva*) to the state of *Brahman*. Only the guru offers the means of individualistic salvation. As a way of showing their humility and overcoming ego, followers add the word *das*—servant—to their names. Their transnational activities span religious, cultural, social, and humanitarian domains. Through these activities, it aims to preserve Indian culture, ideals of Hindu faith, family unity, selfless service, interfaith harmony and peaceful coexistence. The 55,000 volunteers, and 3,850 temples, serve 3,850 communities around the world.

BAPS, as a leading form of diaspora Hinduism, is responsible for the rise of huge marble temples in the suburban landscape. The stunning \$18 million Robbinsville, New Jersey, structure is made entirely out of stone, with ninety-eight pillars and two large domes made from Italian marble, encased in a larger building to protect it from the Northeast's weather. Nearly every foot of the temple is decorated with intricate carvings.

For many Americans, this will be the form of encountering Hinduism. Even among rabbis, this becomes one of the reference points. In 2007, the chief rabbi of Israel visited the vast temple complex of the Akshardem

Temple in Delhi. This contemporary temple has a museum on the history of the movement, a theater showing movies about Hinduism, and even a Disney-style boat ride through Hindu themes. It also has a large restaurant and a park for the family.

Since its origin, Swaminarayan Hinduism has been noted for its preservation of Gujarati cultural and linguistic traditions, along with its dedication to social services and a strict ethical code, including uncompromising segregation of the genders. Raymond Williams, professor at Wabash College and author of several books on BAPS, connects their thought to the British modernization of Gujarat, allowing for enlightenment and capitalism. Swaminarayan responded to the modernization by emphasizing individual and collective work as the fruit of one's labors, being prudent, honest, and just living. Williams labeled, then, a Hindu form of the Protestant work ethic.

The group dissolves caste and hierarchy and focuses on the laity. It is, in many ways, sectarian as a Jewish Orthodoxy, but open to culture, technology, and politics. BAPS is especially attractive to middle and upper-middle-class conservative professionals seeking to combine their professional life with a disciplined religious life, along with strict ritual observance. Similar to other American houses of worship, the temples have sermons and classes, preaching, youth groups, music, language, and cooking classes, as well as social services.

Unlike traditional Hindu temples, but more akin to American churches, the BAPS temple has daily readings and discourses on various Hindu scriptures. During weekend assemblies, there is congregational worship of call-and-response hymns (kirtans) with traditional musical accompaniment. These temples also publish many social welfare-type classes and books on marriage, family, raising children, hard work, sobriety, what to do with problems in families such as alcoholism or abuse. They advocate spiritual service (*seva*) as a form of devotion where devotees serve selflessly, "while keeping only the Lord in mind."

Followers of BAPS are strict, at least in theory, in many ritual aspects, especially in that they are strictly vegetarian and do not eat onions or garlic. Ideally, they do not eat any food not cooked by one of their own members and offered as *parsadem*. At a Hindu-Jewish encounter, the organizers provided vegetarian food but did not know that the BAPS members would

only eat unpeeled raw fruit at the meeting since non-Hindus cooked the catered food. They fast every eleventh day of each half of each lunar month and avoid worldly pleasures by strongly attaching themselves to God.

The biggest stricture of BAPS is that men and women are separated in temple and social gatherings. Tradition also does not allow any intoxicants at public festivities, such as Holi celebrations. The temples each have a big social hall; however, few outside groups rent them because BAPS does not allow touching between the sexes, any mixing of the sexes including at weddings, and no alcohol in their temples.

To maintain decorum, ordinary people cannot offer up the plates of food, only the priests can make offerings. There is no longer any tossing or distribution of fruit or flowers. *Abhishek*, through which people offer *bhakti* by pouring water, milk, honey or other liquids, is limited to only water and only in a special location outside the main sanctuary with adequate drainage.

In BAPS, deities are minimized in that they are not given statues and altars, rather they are included among the hundreds of gods and *devas* carved into the decorations of the building and its pillars. The worship of the guru and Swaminarayan founder substitutes for the pantheon of deities. Prominent is the new custom of congregational singing and collective worship.

Even home worship (*puja*), central to Hindu life, has been reworked for decorum and is closer to Western prayer. They perform it as a visualization of offering rather than an actual offering of fruit and flowers. The traditional offering of the flowers and foods is only in one's mind. Afterwards, one prays for success in studies, the health of ill family members, for increasing devotion, and for peace in their home, country, and the world.

Gayatri Pariwar

Another Hindu temple in New Jersey is the Gayatri Chetna Center, which describes itself as a provision of services and activities that “encourages individual reformation, dissemination of scientific spirituality and social-cultural reformation.”^[24] Pandit Shriram Sharma Acharya (1911–1990) was a social reformer and founder of “All World Gayatri Pariwar,” who

sought the revival of Hindu spirituality in the idiom of individualism, science, and citizenship. Sharma visited the ashrams of Sri Aurobindo, Ramana Maharshi, Rabindranath Tagore, and Gandhi. Nevertheless, he chose as his banner the importance of being scientific.

Pandit Sharma was convinced that modern man could not accept ancient spirituality unless it proved scientifically viable for the benefit of the individual and society. He founded the Brahmavarchas Research Institute as a scientific spirituality research laboratory, where the institute carried out experiments to show the benefit of spiritual practices. They produced many books on the science of spirituality, research directions on the brain and consciousness, discussions on child psychology and family institutions, guidelines on mental, emotional, and physical health, and a cheerful attitude in daily life.

In light of this scientific approach, Sharma taught that the Hindu myths of the *Puranas* were not relevant in the present, the mythical characters no longer inspiring. Hence, he wrote his own book *Pragya Purana* in the narrative style of the *Puranas* to preach the eternal principles of happy, progressive, and ideal life relevant to the modern age.

The denomination has three core values that characterize the way of “Simple Living and High Thinking” is consisting of *Upasana (bhakti)*, which is meditating in a tranquil surrounding; *sadhana (jnana)*, the practice of self-refinement through self-discipline, introspection, and self-analysis; and *Aradhana (karma)*, which is the selfless service through regular donation of time, talent, and resources for the welfare of the society.

This center produces a huge collection of books and DVDs on spirituality and self-development. The objectives of this movement are to reform the individual, the family, and social values. Similar to modern Jewish self-understandings, followers of this group stress ethics and a morality code, and the importance of being good citizens of the society. They exhort their members to follow the Golden Rule and “live lives of virtues of Wisdom, Honesty, Responsibility and Courage.” Since they expect their members to be volunteers in community projects, they show themselves as ideal neighbors.

The group affirms that the human being is the maker of his own destiny, not determined by or forced from past lives or society. From this conviction, religion is to uplift and transform lives for the good, which in turn

will then automatically change the world for the better.

Modern Monotheism

These modern temples claim on their websites to be theists and teach it in Sunday school classes and educational material. They are as monotheistic as other Americans are. Yet, those who belong to these modern temples are told in the press by non-Hindus that they are polytheists and their children are told in school textbooks that they are polytheists.

As stated earlier in this book, the historical phenomena of Hinduism has many conceptions of God from theist, monist, panentheist, polytheist, henotheist, and others. However, they do not want Westerners deciding for them what they believe and how to label it.

The correct term for the monotheism of these groups in Hindu terms is *Para Brahman* (Supreme Being) or *Suayam Bhagwan* (Lord Himself), but if they translate it as monotheism, it is not for the outsider to reject it. *Para Brahman* is the “Highest *Brahman*” that is beyond all descriptions and conceptualizations. *Brahman* is the material, efficient, formal and final cause of all that exists. “He is the prime eternal among all eternals. He is the supreme living entity of all living entities, and He alone is maintaining all life” (Katha Upanishad 2.2.13). In *Advaita Vedanta*, the *Nirguna Brahman* (*Brahman* without qualities) is *Para Brahman*. In Shaivism and Shaktism, the personified Shiva is *Para Brahman*. In Vaishnavism it is Narayana, Vishnu or Krishna who is *para-Brahman* or the Supreme personality of Godhead. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Suayam Bhagwan* (Lord Himself) intones: “There is no truth superior to Me. Everything rests upon Me, as pearls are strung on a thread” (*Bhagavad Gita* 7.7).

All three groups discussed in this chapter clearly call themselves monotheists on their websites. Dr. Mysorekar of the Flushing Ganesha Temple stated that there is only one Supreme Being, which in Hinduism is *Brahman*, which is formless and with the attributes of omniscience,

omnipresence and omnipotence. According to her, “Sages and seers worship god in a formless way, but icons are used to help ordinary Hindu devotees concentrate.”^[25]

BAPS lists on its websites and in its educational material that the core belief of Hindu *dharma* is that of “Parabrahma, One Supreme *Bhagwan*, or God, who is unparalleled and the highest entity. Parabrahma manifests in various forms, but He is one and supreme.” To which they add that “Hindu *dharma* is monotheistic, worshipping one but with respect for all Gods and spirituality. To be more precise, it is henotheistic, meaning the belief in and worship of one Supreme God without denying the existence of other ‘gods’ or forms of the Supreme God.”^[26]

The Gayatri Chetna Center states that it firmly believes “in the Omnipresence of God and His Unfailing justice,” a moral monotheism, which it explains using scientific terminology. Shiva represents matter and his consort Parvati represents energy; together they yield Ganesh who represents light and sound, which in turn yields *Skanda-Murugan* as male light and *Jyothi* as female light. The worship of Gayatri is as the energy of the universe and *shakti* as the force of infinite mercy.

Yet, often Westerners reject these self-understandings as apologetic, cliché, and only said for show. Westerners, including Jews who have visited India, are willing to declare as definitive that any elementary school Jewish child knows that Hinduism presents the same biblical idols, and their offerings are reminiscent of the pagans. If Hindus assumed that Judaism is Leviticus and commented that they thought our synagogues without altars are not true Judaism, then you would want to correct them. So too here. My advice is to talk to Hindus themselves.

NOTES

- ^{1.} The modernist trajectory of Neo-Vedanta and Neo-Hinduism is presented in any historical survey of Hinduism.
- ^{2.} Vivekananda, “Speech Given at the Parliament of World Religions on 19th September, 1893,” *Collected Writings*, Volume I (Vedanta Press, 1947).
- ^{3.} His works are readily accessible and very readable. They form the basis of many Indian textbooks at Banares Hindu University and reflect an understanding of Hinduism of the educated professional. Sarvepalli

Radhakrishnan, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Macmillan, 1918); idem, *Indian Philosophy*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923); idem, *The Hindu View of Life* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1926); idem, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939); idem, *The Principal Upanishads* (London HarperCollins Publishers Limited, 1953); idem, *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) with Charles A. Moore as coeditor.

[4.](#) Rabindranath Tagore, *Religion of Man* (London: George, Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1931). The conversation with Einstein is appendix II, pp. 222–225.

[5.](#) Ananda, *Hindu View of Judaism Study Based on the Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda* (New Delhi: APC Publications, 1996).

[6.](#) Marie Louis Burke's *Swami Vivekananda in the West* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1957).

[7.](#) Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1926); idem, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939).

[8.](#) Surendranath Dasgupta, *Religion and the Rational Outlook* (Alahabad: Allahabad Law Journal Press, 1954), 16–17.

[9.](#) Dasgupta, *Religion and the Rational Outlook*, 314–317.

[10.](#) For a classic critique of some of the excesses and commercial marketing by gurus, see Gita Mehta, *Karma Cola* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979); on the rise of American gurus, see Ann Gleig and Lola Williamson, eds., *Homegrown Gurus: From Hinduism in America to American Hinduism* (Albany: SUNY, 2013).

[11.](#) Sri Ramana Maharshi, *Be as You Are: The Teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi*, ed. David Godman (London: Penguin-UK, 1988).

[12.](#) Paramahansa Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946).

[13.](#) Idem, *The Essence of Self-Realization: The Wisdom of Paramhansa Yogananda* (Nevada City, CA: Crystal Clarity, 1990), 31.

[14.](#) Swami Venkatesānanda, *Sivananda: Biography of a Modern Sage* (Freemantle, WA: Divine Life Society, 1985); Swami Vishnudevananda, *Meditation and Mantras* (New York: OM Lotus Pub, 1978); idem, *The Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga* (New York, Three Rivers Press, 1960); Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Véronique Altglas, *From Yoga to Kabbalah: Religious Exoticism and the Logics of Bricolage* (Oxford: Oxford University

Press, 2014).

15. Shelly Dembe, *Wrestling with Yoga: Journey of a Jewish Soul* (Self-published via Createspace 2014).

16. Steven A. Rapp, *Aleph-bet Yoga: Embodying the Hebrew Letters for Physical and Spiritual Well-Being* (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2002).

17. Diane Bloomfield, *Torah Yoga: Experiencing Jewish Wisdom through Classic Postures* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2004).

18. Hayyim David Halevi, *Meḳor Hayim: piṣke halakhot ha-neḥutsot be-yoter* (Tel Aviv, 1983), 179–180.

19. For the full article of Rabbi Freeman see

<https://kavvanah.wordpress.com/2013/08/06/yoga-as-a-torah-shiur/>

20. Ibid.

21. Joanne Punzo Waghorne, *Diaspora of the Gods: Modern Hindu Temples in an Urban Middle-Class World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004);

David Smith, *Hinduism and Modernity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003);

Lawrence A. Babb, *Redemptive Encounters: Three Modern Styles in the Hindu Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California, 1986).

22. R. Scott Hanson, *Religious Freedom, Immigration, and Pluralism in Flushing, Queens* (New York: Empire State editions-Fordham University Press, 2016).

23. Raymond Williams, *Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2001).

24. <http://www.gayatricenter.org>

25. “Hinduism and Indian Culture in Queens” in *Queens Buzz*

<http://www.queensbuzz.com/indians-hinduism-in-queens-cms-688>

26. <https://www.baps.org/Spiritual-Living/Hindu-Beliefs/Parabrahma.aspx>

Epilogue-Malida

What if the majority of diaspora Jews had settled on the Ganges River or on the Bay of Bengal, instead of Poland, Germany, Turkey, and Morocco? What would a Judaism that coexisted with Indian culture look like?

The product of such a Jewish-Indian symbiosis should not be considered as any more foreign than the symbiosis of American Jews with American culture, or the symbiosis of Jews who were embedded in the cultures of Hungary, Morocco, Poland, or Turkey. To a historian, American synagogues look like Protestant congregations; Chanukah in the United States seems to have taken on the trappings of Christmas, and we find contemporary Orthodox Jews using in their homilies the twelve-step program of AA and the prosperity gospel. Likewise, contemporary Hindus in the United States are becoming American in their lifestyles and formulation of Hinduism the way Jews did a century earlier.

But what of Jews who lived in India? Professor Nathan Katz, who is the hub of Indo-Judaic studies, produced an ethnographic look at Cochin Jews showing that their Judaism is embedded in Indian culture, performing their own Jewish synagogue rites in a Hindu manner. To take one of many examples, in their Simchat Torah celebration, the Jews of Cochin use the three elements typical of Hindu temple festivals, display, procession, and disposal. "Like a Hindu deity the Torah scrolls are . . . displayed on a temporary structure . . . paralleling the Hindu cart."^[1] Then, similar to the way deities are treated, they carry the Torah scroll through a public area in which they bow, kiss, and chant to it. Most notable is that the temporary ark used in the procession is ritually demolished at the end of the festival, similar to the way Hindus demolish at the end of a procession the deity and the cart on which the deity rode.^[2]

In a basic primer on Jewish belief written by a twentieth-century Jew from India for Indian Jews, the author describes the synagogue as a place of the dwelling of the divine immanence as *Shekhinah*, and the purpose of prayer as blessing and mental tranquility. This is the way a Hindu would describe his own temple (*mandir*) as providing mental tranquility.^[3] Many

Jews in India greet each other with the *namaskar* and wave their hands as in *aarti* before Sabbath candles, and treat Holi as a secular civil holiday.

Indian Jews knew intuitively how to balance cultural symbiosis with their Judaism, as did Jews in other lands. As a rule of thumb, they knew never to bow down to a statue, or at any place of worship that was not a synagogue. An Indian Jew told me: “We somehow knew instinctively when we were about to cross a line,” especially, “not bowing down before their gods.”^[4]

Today there are approximately eighty-five thousand Jews from India living in Israel and a few thousand still living in India. The Bene Israel Indian Jews are one of five distinct Indian Jewish communities (Cochini, Bene Israel, Baghdadi, Bnei Menashe, and Bene Ephraim).

A striking example of acculturation done by the Bene Israel Jewish Indian community is the Jewish *puja* to the prophet Elijah, called the Malida ceremony. It is also called Elijah the Prophet ceremony as the prophet Elijah is considered the guardian prophet of the Bene Israel community, so much so that they maintain a shrine to Elijah, consisting of a rock southeast of Mumbai that contains the two hoof prints of Elijah’s chariot horses. During this ceremony, Jews go to the shrine of the prophet Elijah, offer a plate of food similar to Hindu *puja* along with a coconut offering and light a lamp, along with prayers. Afterwards, they eat the food the way Hindus eat *parsadem* from offerings.

The Bene Israel narrates two occasions when Prophet Elijah visited India and returned to heaven. The first account credits him with the foundation of their community, in that Elijah rescued the handful of Jews who escaped after the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE) in Jerusalem and were shipwrecked and washed ashore on the Konkan Coast in the state of Maharashtra, just south of Mumbai. On this occasion, Prophet Elijah revived the unconscious Bene Israels who washed up on the beach from the sea.

The second story occurred at the time of the story of Prophet Elijah’s ascent to heaven on a fiery chariot (Kings II 1–18). The Bene Israel believe Prophet Elijah made a pit stop in the village of Khandala near Alibaug. It is also believed that the chariot’s wheels and horse footprints that are visible today, were imprinted on a large rock when he took off to heaven.

Footprints of saints, and even chariot horses of saints, are considered holy in Indian culture.

The Malida ceremony is a voluntary offering performed as desired by the devotee, usually to celebrate happy occasions such as wedding henna ceremonies, engagement parties, for good health, to bless a new house, and the birth of a child. It is also customary to offer the Malida on the Jewish holiday of Tu B-Shevat, the new year for trees.

When one arrives at the shrine to Elijah one cracks a coconut on the spot, letting the coconut water spill onto the rock, and then one lights a lamp in Elijah's honor. The major part of the ceremony is the offering of a dish called a Malida of sweetened rice prayed over and served at the ceremony. The sweetened rice is mixed with coconut flakes, flavored and scented with cardamom, and garnished with almonds and pistachios. It is served on a large thali (round Indian stainless steel dish) and adorned with five fruits. Traditionally, the fruits are a banana, an orange, an apple, a date, and a pear, although it could be any other in-season fruit. Some use seven fruits. They decorate the heaping thali with roses or rose petals. A handful of Malida along with sliced fruit and a date are then disbursed as *parasad* to all guests after the blessings.

During the ceremony, they recite the Hebrew prayer *Veyiten Lecha*, a lengthy collection of biblical blessings, usually recited by Jews at the conclusion of Shabbat ceremony. They ask Elijah to appear in their homes and bring blessings. Everyone sings the Elijah the Prophet melody from a transliterated siddur (Hebrew words written in Hindi/Marathi characters) and blessings over the fruit are recited during the ceremony. In addition, they have a tradition of singing Marathi Jewish songs, but these have been replaced in recent years by Hebrew songs. Scholars note an influence of kirtans and abhangs on these songs.

One might ascribe this ritual as just similar to Hindu *puja* and *prasad*, but the community sees it as continuity with traditional Jewish practices. In their understanding, they are following the offerings of Leviticus (chapter 7), since the majority of the offerings in that chapter can be performed without a temple or priests. Six of these offerings are performed through the Malida offering: thanks, peace offering, voluntary free will offering, vow offering, nazirite offering, and purification of a woman after childbirth. In their self-understanding, they use the Malida cereal since the Israelites would bring

parched and flattened wheat grains as an offering at the Temple in Jerusalem. They, however, substitute rice for wheat in order to differentiate themselves from the Temple form.^[5]

When seeing the Jewish symbiosis with Indian culture one should avoid assuming that their customs betray outside influences, while falsely assuming the Ashkenazim and Sephardim are pure, original, and uninfluenced. When Indian Jews take off their shoes before a holy place, they assume they are following the biblical example of Moses taking off his shoes in front of the burning bush. Sitting in synagogue pews in an American synagogue may show more outside influence than removing shoes or even performing Malida offerings.

This leaves us with the fundamental question of this book, the ability to compare the two faiths. I translated many Hindu religious ideas into ideas that could possibly make sense to Jews. I showed, as best as possible, that the wisdom of Hinduism can be understandable in Jewish terms. I discussed many similarities and differences between Judaism and Hinduism but at many points, there remain unbridgeable gaps.

The biggest question endures: If Jews were brought up culturally knowing about the Vedas, *Puranas*, *Vedanta*, and Yoga because these ideas were part of general culture, the way Jews under Christendom and Islam were embedded in their cultures, then would some of the gaps between Hinduism and Judaism be bridged? Are some of the incongruities between the two religions due to Western ideas more than Jewish ones? If medieval Jews had studied *Nyaya* and *Vedanta* instead of Plato and Aristotle, would it have changed Jewish theological thinking? And if modern Judaism had been formed against the background of the Bengali Renaissance instead of Western Enlightenment, would contemporary Jewish categories be different? Likewise, from the other direction, if Hindus were to start learning Talmud, Maimonides, Kabbalah, Hasidut, and Rabbis Heschel and Soloveitchik, would that create greater common language? Both faiths are just beginning a new encounter with the other.

NOTES

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